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The odd career of our new man at the United Nations.

AMERICA'S TOP MESSENGER BOY

BY MICHAEL MASSING

THE SENATE confirmation hearing last May for Vernon A. Walters, nominated to replace Jeane Kirkpatrick as ambassador to the United Nations, lasted exactly 48 minutes. Most of them were given over to flattery and deference. Democrat Joseph Biden, for one, could hardly contain himself: "I have only been here going on 13 years," he said, "and I think you are about the most fascinating guy who has ever appeared before us. . . . You are a man of extraordinarily broad range. Yours is a career that is something the novelists make up." Walters's nomination sailed through without dissent.

This was the fifth confirmation hearing in Walters's long career, and all have been equally pro forma. Vernon "Dick" Walters, now 68 years old, commands respect. He was with Harriman in Paris at the birth of the Marshall Plan, with Truman at Wake Island when he confronted MacArthur, with Nixon when his car was attacked

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by angry mobs in Venezuela. He smuggled Henry Kissinger in and out of Paris during his secret talks with the Chinese and North Vietnamese. And, as deputy director of the CIA from 1972 to 1976, he was one of the few Nixon appointees to emerge from Watergate with his reputation intact.

Over the last four years Walters has traveled to 108 countries in his job as ambassador-at-large for the Reagan administration. From Mengistu Haile Mariam to the pope, Walters undertook the administration's most sensitive diplomatic missions. When Roberto d'Aubuisson threatened to get out of hand in El Salvador, it was Walters who went to straighten him out. And when Fidel Castro expressed his willingness to talk with the United States, it was Walters who was dispatched to meet him.

Personally as well as professionally, Walters seems larger than life. Fluent in seven foreign languages, he has frequently been called on to translate for presidents. On visiting a foreign land, Walters has been known to arrive early and ride the buses for a day in order to pick up the

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local dialect. He is a lifelong bachelor and devout Catholic who never skips Sunday Mass. His talents as a raconteur are well known, and his engaging personality has won him friends of all political persuasions.

Most remarkable of all is Walters's durability. He is now entering his fifth decade of government service. Walters always seems to surface in some capacity, be it translator, envoy, soldier, or spy. "He's indestructible," says Thomas Powers, the author of *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, a history of the CIA. "He's been a workhorse for so many administrations. They feel free to call on him to do just about anything." Powers sees Walters as a modern-day courtier, a person whom rulers can count on to do unpleasant "housekeeping" chores in a loyal, uncomplaining manner. Richard Helms, one of Walters's bosses at the CIA, observes, "As Harriman once said, 'I may not agree with him, but he's loyal and always does as he's asked.'" He adds that Walters "is an accomplished linguist and a very bright fellow, but he's not a policymaker." Indeed, through 40 years of government service, Walters has never held a policy-making post.

As U.N. ambassador, he at last has a podium for his own views, and the world may be startled by what it hears. Vernon Walters may be a man of many tongues, but the language he speaks best is the language of the cold war.

TO UNDERSTAND Vernon Walters, there's no better place to begin than his memoirs. *Silent Missions*, published in 1978, is surely one of the most extraordinary political autobiographies ever written. Not for the insights it offers into contemporary history or world politics—there's little of that—but for the cascade of details it pours forth. Walters is by nature a garrulous man, and in these 630 pages he recounts virtually every unclassified act to have befallen him, from negotiating with Mossadegh in Iran to losing a cat in Vichy.

The great figures of postwar history parade through the book, their every gesture recorded for posterity. When Walters is laid up in the hospital, Eisenhower sends flowers and helps him get a private room. When Jacqueline Kennedy waits for a plane connection at the Rome airport, Walters is there to keep her company. A whole chapter is devoted to de Gaulle, recounting every conference and state dinner at which the two men met. We even learn of the mementos de Gaulle bestows on Walters: a cigarette case on one occasion, a lighter on another.

By far the most ubiquitous presence in the book, though, is Walters's mother, who lived with him until she died in 1964. When Walters calls on the pope, he takes his mother along. On one occasion, Laura Walters causes a crisis by sending her son's only wing collar to the laundry hours before he is due at a formal dinner. And, when Walters is transferred from Washington to a NATO job in France, he writes that "as usual I left my mother behind to do all of the actual work of moving and flew to Paris."

Vernon Walters was born in New York City in 1917. At the age of six he moved with his family to France and then Britain, where he gained proficiency in French, Spanish, Italian, and German. Returning to the U.S. as a teenager, Walters had to drop out of school to help with his father's insurance business. Years of clerkdom stretched ahead of him when World War II intervened. In the Army, Walters's language skills gained him admission to officers' school and then assignment to an intelligence unit. He eventually ended up in Italy, where General Mark Clark, impressed with his language mastery, made him his staff aide.

From there Walters's rise has a storied quality about it. In 1945 Major Walters was assigned to Brazil as assistant Army attaché. When General Marshall came for a visit, Walters translated for him. Marshall subsequently recommended him to Averell Harriman, who took him to Paris to assist in administering the Marshall Plan. When Harriman returned to Washington two years later, Walters went with him. In Washington his knowledge of languages came to the attention of Eisenhower, who took him as his translator on a 1951 tour of Europe. Throughout the 1950s he accompanied Eisenhower on all of his trips abroad. In 1960 Walters, by then a colonel, became Army attaché in Italy; two years later he was posted to Brazil.

IT WAS TO BE an eventful assignment. President João Goulart, a left-leaning populist and nationalist, seemed determined to enact far-reaching social and economic reforms. This distressed many Brazilian military officers, who by early 1964 began plotting Goulart's overthrow. Walters, who had excellent contacts within the Brazilian military, kept in close touch with the conspiring officers. So close that in the week before the coup, he wired precise details back to Washington, accurately predicting the day on which the *golpe* was to begin (March 31, 1964). The coup's leader was General Humberto Castelo Branco, a very close friend of Walters; the two had been floor-mates in Italy in World War II. Walters had lunch with the general the day after his inauguration.

All of which has led to widespread charges that Walters helped instigate the coup. "He was the linchpin, the one person all the officers would talk to while they were still afraid to talk with one another," says Jan Knippers Black, author of the book *United States Penetration of Brazil* (1977), which is highly critical of U.S. policy. Walters denies this, maintaining that he did only what his job required, which was to gather information. "What advice could an American colonel give to Brazilian generals who'd overthrown two governments in the previous five years?" he asks. "I was a well-informed observer, not a participant." He says that of the many documents from the period that have been declassified, "not one shows any participation by me."

Those same documents do show that the United States fully backed the coup and even drew up contingency

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plans to intervene if necessary. In the end, whether Walters simply reported on the coup or actually helped foment it is probably a moot point. Even assuming that he exercised remarkable self-restraint and did not communicate Washington's approval of the coup, his presence was probably enough to reassure the plotters. Either way, Walters was simply carrying out U.S. government policy. Within a year of the coup, he was promoted to brigadier general.

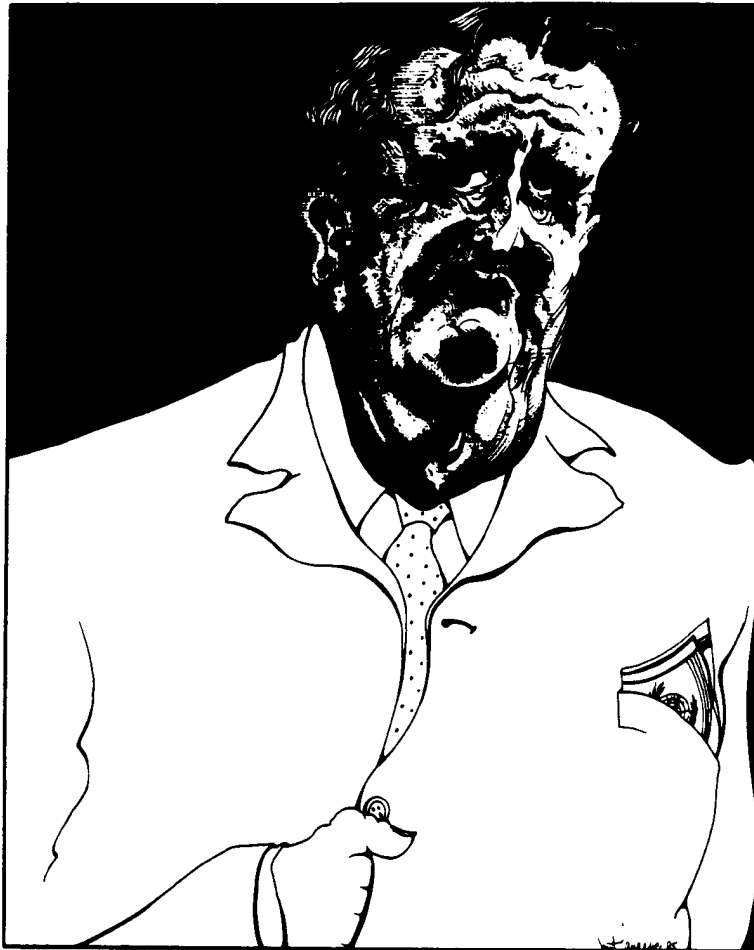
Once the coup had succeeded, Walters did not conceal his joy. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. recalls meeting Walters at Harriman's estate soon after Goulart's overthrow. "He was so pleased with the coup," says Schlesinger. "He seemed extreme in his views of Goulart. Goulart was a sometimes radical demagogue, but Walters thought he was an agent of international communism." Even in 1978, after Brazil had undergone years of repression, Walters had only praise for the coup: "A regime basically unfriendly to the United States had been replaced by another one much more friendly. Some may regard this as bad. I do not. I am convinced that if the revolution had not occurred, Brazil would have gone the way of Cuba. . . . We would have had another Gulag archipelago."

In 1967 Walters received a plum assignment—military attaché in Paris. But he wasn't happy. As he explains in his memoirs, it would have been "intolerable" for him "to go straight from the cocktail circuit in Rio de Janeiro to the cocktail circuit in Paris," especially with the Vietnam War in progress. So he made a detour to see that conflict firsthand. He was there only slightly more than a month, and from his own account, he seems to have spent most of his time flying in and out of battle zones—camera in hand—inspecting the damage after some fierce battle or other. For Walters, Vietnam was a "battlefield of freedom," "one of the noblest and most unselfish wars in which the United States had ever participated." Despite the brevity of his stay in Vietnam, Walters was promptly pro-

moted to major general. Then it was off to Paris for cocktails.

After five years in France—highlighted by Henry Kissinger's 15 secret missions—Walters returned to Washington in 1972 to become deputy director of the CIA. No sooner had he been installed than Watergate began to explode. In June the FBI's investigation of the burglary threatened to expose the White House connection, and Nixon decided to enlist the CIA's help in calling off the bureau. Walters was chosen for the job because, as John Dean later told the Senate

Watergate Committee, "he was a good friend of the White House and the White House had put him in as deputy director so that they might have some influence over the agency." Nixon's chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, told Walters that the FBI's probe could expose sensitive operations in Mexico and that he should instruct the bureau to back off. Walters complied. Soon after, Walters checked out the White House story and found it wasn't true. Sensing a cover-up, he refused to cooperate further with the president's men, turning down a request that the CIA post the burglars' bail. Walters won praise for his performance, and in 1973 received a CIA medal for withstanding external pressure.



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Walters spent much of his time at the agency coordinating CIA liaison with foreign intelligence agencies; as part of his duties, he received more than 50 chiefs of foreign intelligence services on their visits to Washington. One of the organizations he dealt with was DINA, Chile's dreaded secret police. Walters has acknowledged that, as part of his normal liaison activities, he twice received DINA's head, Manuel Contreras, on his visits to Washington.

The connection came to light after two DINA agents assassinated Orlando Letelier, Chile's foreign minister under Salvador Allende. In the summer of 1976 Walters traveled to Paraguay to negotiate the release of a CIA agent from jail. A few weeks later two DINA agents

bearing false passports showed up in Paraguay requesting U.S. visas. Their stated mission: to investigate Chilean exiles living in the U.S. The agents said they intended to contact Walters once they arrived in Washington. The U.S. ambassador in Paraguay sent Walters a cable inquiring about the mission. Walters, who had just retired from the agency, replied that he knew nothing about the Chileans and had no desire to see them. The visas were denied. But the DINA agents managed to enter the U.S. by other means and, in September 1976, they successfully carried out their real mission—the murder of Letelier.

THE TIMING of Walters's visit to Paraguay, plus the DINA agents' use of his name, has raised suspicions, especially among former associates of Letelier in Washington, that Walters knew in advance about the DINA mission. Walters dismisses such charges. He notes that he met with FBI agents about the case and offered to take a lie-detector test. He also met with the prosecutor in the case, Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper. "He had all the CIA records, all the files," says Walters. "Why didn't he call me to testify?" Propper, now in private practice in Washington, backs up Walters's account: "Walters had no connection to any of this. He was already out of the agency."

Walters got a chance to comment on the assassination in 1981 during a congressional hearing on Chile. Letelier, he asserted, had been receiving money from the Cuban intelligence service. Asked if Letelier had thus posed a threat to Chile, Walters replied, "Well, I really can't say. I think whoever did it thought so. You know, it was like Talleyrand's remark to Napoleon after the murder of the Duke of Enghien, whom Napoleon had kidnapped in Germany. . . . He had brought him to Paris and he shot him in the moat of the Castle of Vincennes. And Talleyrand, who was an absolutely unscrupulous rascal and a very wise man, was pouting and Napoleon said, 'Mr. Talleyrand, you think it was a crime, don't you?' And Talleyrand said, 'No, Your Majesty, it was worse. It was a mistake.' I think if there was ever a mistake, it was the killing of Orlando Letelier." The remark is vintage Walters, in both its use of anecdote and its refusal to pass moral judgment on an authoritarian ally, in this case Pinochet's Chile.

After his retirement from the CIA in 1976, Walters moved to Palm Beach, Florida. But he returned to Washington after Ronald Reagan's victory to serve as ambassador-at-large. Walters's connections and stature made him, in many respects, a superb emissary. Leaders on the left knew that when Walters came calling, they had better listen. And leaders on the right were more willing to hear out a former lieutenant general than an effete foreign service type. Thus, Roberto d'Aubuisson seems to have gotten the message when Walters warned him not to knock off the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador. And when U.S. relations with Spain became strained, Walters was sent to meet with Socialist

premier Felipe Gonzalez and relieve the tension. Walters, says one State Department admirer, is "a master diplomat."

Perhaps nowhere did Walters's skills prove more useful than in approaching the Latin American military governments that had become pariahs under Jimmy Carter. Walters undertook frequent goodwill missions to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. One of his objectives was to help lift the arms embargoes that the U.S. under Carter had imposed on the region's prime human rights offenders. In March 1981, for instance, Walters told a House subcommittee of his opposition to sanctions against Chile. As usual, Walters appealed to history to make his case: "I was a very young man when Italy invaded Ethiopia and the whole world banded together to apply sanctions to Italy. They had no effect. I know of no case where sanctions of any kind have ever influenced a government other than to rally the people around the government even though the government may have been unpopular at the time." (This stand did not keep Walters from publicly endorsing the U.S. trade embargo against Nicaragua in a press conference last May.)

GUATEMALA WAS another frequent destination. In 1981 the regime of General Romeo Lucas Garcia was generally regarded as the most repressive in the hemisphere. From the start of Lucas's presidency in 1978, thousands of Guatemalans had been killed by the security forces; an estimated 400 people were slaughtered in January 1981 alone. Nonetheless, Walters visited Lucas three times to express the administration's desire to restore military aid. Privately, Walters told Lucas that a resumption of assistance would require some improvement in his government's human rights record.

Publicly Walters held a rare press conference in May 1981 in Guatemala City. Speaking in Spanish, he told reporters that the United States wanted to help the Lucas government defend "peace and liberty" and "the constitutional institutions of this country against the ideologies that want to finish off those institutions." Noting that it was "not difficult to see which are our friends and which are not," Walters promised that Washington would "stay by the side of our allies." When asked about reports of extensive political killings in the country, Walters replied dismissively, "There will be human rights problems in the year 3000 with the governments of Mars and the moon. There are some problems that are never resolved."

Ambassador-at-large Walters was a regular visitor to Africa as well. In northern Africa, Walters worked to isolate Libya and to strengthen the administration's ties with the region's pro-Western regimes—Nimeiry's Sudan, Bourguiba's Tunisia, and especially Hassan's Morocco. Walters had known King Hassan since World War II, when he gave the 13-year-old prince a ride in an American tank. Hassan is one of Washington's few friends in the Arab world, and Walters frequently visited Rabat in an effort to keep it that way. He also traveled to Algeria, seeking to draw that traditionally

left-leaning country into the Western camp.

In southern Africa, Walters served as traveling salesman for the administration's "constructive engagement" policy. He visited virtually all of the black "Front Line" states, attempting to convince them to negotiate with South Africa. Two visits he made to Angola in the summer of 1982 throw some light on Walters's operating style. At first glance, he might seem an odd choice for such a mission. After all, according to John Stockwell, a former CIA employee who broke with the agency and wrote an account of the Angola campaign, *In Search of Enemies*, Walters had tried to enlist Brazilian and French help in the CIA's unsuccessful effort in 1975 to install a pro-Western government in Angola.

But Walters speaks Portuguese and knows the region, and he was sent to talk with President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and other high officials. His objective was to convince Angola to enter a dialogue with South Africa. Despite Walters's background, the Angolans were impressed with his affability and fluency, according to Gerald Bender, an Angola expert at the University of Southern California who briefed Walters before his meeting with dos Santos. Bender recalls that during Walters's stay, he handed out chocolate bars to everyone in sight.

There was only one problem: shortly after he left, the South Africans bombed an Angolan town. Within weeks, they began their annual summer offensive. The Angolans were livid, and Walters was never sent back to talk with them. "The South Africans left Walters without any credibility," says Bender. Did Walters know about the South Africans' intentions? Bender doubts it. "Quite probably the South Africans pulled the rug out from under him. He acted strictly as a messenger boy. He presented what he came with."

AS AMBASSADOR to the United Nations, too, Vernon Walters can be trusted to carry out the secretary of state's instructions. His reputation for loyalty surely helped him get the post. George Shultz, who became dyspeptic whenever Jeane Kirkpatrick strayed from the reservation, should enjoy much better digestion with Walters. Still, the U.N. post requires a great deal of spontaneous debate, and the world will no doubt have the opportunity to hear Walters unbound.

Politically, Walters describes himself as "right of center—midway between Lowell Weicker and Jesse Helms." He becomes indignant whenever anyone questions the Reagan administration's commitment to human rights: "One of my principal purposes has been to remind people all over the world about our attitude to human rights. . . . When I think of the number of trips I've made on human rights matters, and then hear the Reagan administration accused of callousness, it makes me angry." In Africa, in fact, Walters has helped spring prisoners from the jails of regimes of the left and right.

Frequently, however, Walters's pronouncements sound distinctly Helmsian. The world of *Silent Missions* is full

of fanatical communists incessantly scheming to enslave the free world. In discussing the events of May 1968 in France, Walters saw parallels to Czechoslovakia, "where the population had gone to sleep in a democracy and had awakened in a Communist state." The Dominican Republic in 1965 faced "a brutal Communist takeover," and the U.S.-led invasion enabled the country "to find its way to stable, orderly democratic government again." More generally, Walters remarked that "the Latin American military are a stabilizing force and a block to the ambitions of the Communists." This in 1978, when Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay were locked in the vise of military dictatorships.

TODAY, Walters maintains that Augusto Pinochet's regime "is unquestionably the legitimate government of Chile"; his last election, in 1980, was "fair and legitimate." He does add "that doesn't mean I approve of what he's doing." He has nothing but praise for Zairian president Mobutu Sese Seko, whom Walters considers a good friend (he attended Mobutu's most recent inauguration in December), and who, he says, "has held his country together. That's no small achievement."

I asked Walters about Guatemala. "This country has not solved its human rights problem," he said. "Its government hasn't solved a lot of problems—schooling, housing, hunger, human rights. Every government has to face these things." Recalling his conversations with Lucas Garcia, he said, "I told him there was no chance he would get aid while he was killing bystanders, killing college professors and labor leaders. He didn't comply." So was the "quiet diplomacy" favored by the administration effective? "In the long run, yes," said Walters. "The Guatemalan military realized it wouldn't get anywhere by killing people. The military is beginning to understand. They're not killing as many people as they did before." (In July *The New York Times* reported that "Guatemala appears to still have the worst incidence of human rights violations in Central America." It quoted the archbishop of Guatemala as saying that "the Army kills many people [including] children.")

Delegates to the United Nations will find in Vernon Walters the embodiment of a great American paradox. On one hand, Walters is a gregarious, earnest, kindhearted man. His image of America was fixed in World War II, when GIs handed out chocolates to war-stricken Europeans. Walters fervently believes in the principle of freedom and will travel anywhere, anytime, to argue on its behalf. In a sense, Walters represents the sense of decency and fair play that lies at the core of the American character. But he also reflects a less attractive side of the national character. This America so fiercely opposes communism that it seems forever ready to reinforce the status quo. It proclaims its support for nationalism and self-determination so loudly that it feels free to intervene in order to preserve them. In the name of freedom, this America makes common cause with dictators and despots. It is an unfortunate message to send to the world. □