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Vernon Walters

Debunking the image of mysterious lone wolf

By Deborah Papier
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The lone wolf. Furtive, mysterious. A creature of the shadows, moving stealthily through those nether regions of the diplomatic world where the light of publicity never shines.

This was the reputation Vernon Walters developed — some would say cultivated — in four decades of service to the United States as a military intelligence officer, deputy director of the CIA and special State Department envoy.

But Vernon [Dick] Walters, who two weeks ago became Jeane Kirkpatrick's replacement as ambassador to the United Nations, doesn't have much patience these days with that cloak-and-dagger image.

"It's bunk," he says. "The lone wolf creeping around; that's an overdone legend. I've been highly visible for a long time. I could show you a box as large as this coffee table filled with cassettes of public speeches I have made in various parts of the United States.

"I have not been publicity-seeking," he continues. "I don't seek the limelight, because I find I can work more effectively if I don't. But I don't shun it either. This idea of my fleeing and hiding ... as I said at the press conference the day I was nominated, I have never traveled under a false name. I have never used a passport that was not made out in my name; and unlike many of the people in this room I could say that I'd never registered in a hotel under any name but my own."

The point that Mr. Walters wishes to make is that he is not some mole suddenly forced, at the age of 68, to adjust to a life above ground. He does not see his new post as representing a radical change in direction for him, but rather as a natural culmination of a long career in foreign affairs that involved him in most of the important events of our time, from the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe after World War II and the founding of the Organization of American States, to the Paris peace talks with the North Vietnamese and the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China.

"The reason why I do not feel awestruck by the job," says Mr. Walters, "is that everything I've been doing for many years has been in direct preparation for it. For 44 years I've been serving the United States all over the world. I've translated for six presidents. I would venture to say I've probably been involved in world affairs longer than any of my predecessors in this job."

"I think Walters comes to the job running full-speed," says former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, for whom Mr. Walters worked as a special envoy. "He'll have no learning process. He's fully abreast of all the international issues, has been involved in the evolution of those issues. He will garner a level of respect that may be unprecedented in the history of that post. I would anticipate he will be the most effective U.N. ambassador we've had in recent years."

Former President Richard Nixon goes even further, saying that Mr. Walters is a "world-class strategic

thinker," and that this skill, combined with his linguistic talents (he speaks eight languages), makes him "the best-qualified American ambassador to the United Nations since the organization was founded."

Despite Mr. Walters' qualifications for the post, the course from his nomination to his confirmation was not a smooth one. He was nominated by President Reagan in early February. Six weeks later, it was reported that he was prepared to turn down the assignment unless he could be guaranteed the same access to National Security Council meetings that Jeane Kirkpatrick had, access that Secretary of State George Shultz evidently wished to deny him.

"It was not a matter of personal pique," says Mr. Walters. "I felt that if the position were diminished, my voice would be muted, and it was not in the interest of the United States to have a U.N. delegate with a muted voice. I also thought that coming on the withdrawal from UNESCO, it could be interpreted as the United States' giving up on the United Nations, turning its back on it."

It is still not clear exactly how much access to the National Security Council Mr. Walters will have, but he professes himself content with the disposition of that particular issue.

"I've been told that the terms of reference of my job are exactly the same as [those of] my predecessor, which is perfectly satisfactory to me. A great many newspapers indicated that I had accepted a downgraded job, a lessened job, and that's just not true.

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"My position is the same as Jeane Kirkpatrick's," he continues. "I've already attended a meeting of the NSC. I am not ber. I don't know whether I'll be invited to all meetings, I don't know whether she was invited to all of them. If you try to make some kind of numerical comparison, I don't think it gets anywhere."

Comparisons with Jeane Kirkpatrick, however, are difficult for Mr. Walters to avoid, much as he would like to. Mrs. Kirkpatrick became an extraordinarily popular figure during the four years she held the U.N. ambassadorship; it is inevitable that people view Mr. Walters, at least in these early days, in relation to her.

On the surface, they are very dissimilar. Mrs. Kirkpatrick is a Ph.D. in political science; Mr. Walters does not have a high-school diploma. She was plucked from academia to serve; he has spent almost his whole life in government service. She became famous very quickly as an electrifying public speaker; Gen. Walters, despite the many speeches he has given, is still not widely known as an orator.

"Jeane is the quintessential academic/activist," says Charles Lichtenstein, a Kirkpatrick deputy at the United Nations and now a senior fellow in international relations at the Heritage Foundation. "Her approach is that of the scholar and also the advocate. Mr. Walters has always been more of the insider; he knows the ropes and he has engaged repeatedly over the years in classical one-on-one negotiations."

"There isn't just one single way to be an effective U.S. ambassador at the United Nations," adds Mr. Lichtenstein. "Jeane has given people the pattern of the eloquent advocate, and Mr. Walters may turn out to be an eloquent advocate, too. But if he's not it may not be a terrible shortcoming. Many different styles are relevant to the job."

Mr. Walters refuses to characterize his own style, saying that is a job for others. Those who have worked with him in the past, however, describe him as solid, steady, loyal, a thoroughgoing professional.

"I have the highest respect for him," says former CIA director William Colby, "for his integrity and his strength and his capabilities. He obviously is enormously knowledgeable about the world, and he is totally dedicated to serving his country. He has ideas of his own but he also has total discipline. He can present his arguments in a situation, have the decision go against him and carry it out with full compliance."

"I expect he will be a very loyal representative of the president," says Walter Stoessel, former deputy secretary of state. "I would not expect him to take any big initiatives on his own. He will work on instructions, and that was not always the case with his predecessor."

Mr. Stoessel also predicts that Mr. Walters, more than Mrs. Kirkpatrick,

will develop good relations with individual delegates from many nations. For one thing, he already knows many of them — and, more important, knows their heads of state. For another, he is able in so many cases to speak to them in their own language, an immense help in earning their trust and friendship.

Mr. Walters has somewhat mixed feelings about his linguistic skills. He loves languages (he speaks French, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, Dutch and Russian), but sometimes feels that people see him as just a glorified translator, overlooking his other abilities.

"I don't like to be known as a sort of weird freakery," he explains. "I've been deputy director of Central Intelligence. I was quite successful in the business world during the years [1976 to '81] I was out of the administration. I'd like it to be understood that the languages are a tool to achieve the things I seek to do in life. They are not the primary purpose of my life."

"When I came to this building [the State Department], for instance, one of my colleagues said, 'Oh, he's a man who speaks eight languages and thinks in none.' I think the greatest satisfaction that I have is that he isn't saying it anymore."

But he doesn't wish to denigrate the importance of languages. He believes that being able to speak to representatives of other countries in their own tongues gives him some special insights into their concerns.

"Americans too often think other people do things for policy reasons," says Mr. Walters. "They don't. And therefore you can get at them through a knowledge of their language, their history and culture."

As for his lack of formal academic training in history and political science, Mr. Walters says, "I'd be ready to discuss history, geography, world affairs with anybody who has a more scholarly background than I do. I do not feel inferior in this area to anyone I have ever met."

"Knowledge of languages implies a good memory," he continues. "I realized that I had shortcomings in certain areas and I tried to fulfill them. A great deal of what I read I retain, and that builds up a considerable fund of knowledge over 44 years of immediate, direct involvement in world affairs."

But Mr. Walters says that dealing with people is his most important skill.

"My strong suit is dealing with people," he adds. "Convincing them to do things that the United States wants them to do, and dissuading them from things the United States does not want them to do."

"Without going into detail," he adds, "I've gotten a lot of people out of jail in very hostile countries. I didn't get advanced from private to the present job just by speaking languages . . . or by being a messenger boy. The people I've worked for like results."

However Mr. Walters' background and skills may differ from Mrs. Kirkpatrick's, it is clear that he sees his mission at the United Nations in similar terms. He wants, he says, to prevent the United States from being "lynched by resolution."

"My effort across-the-board," he says, "will be to try to break up some of these lynching parties, who really don't hate us and really are not against us but are voting out of some mistaken idea that some sort of regional or cultural solidarity impells them to vote against the country that is often one of their greatest benefactors."

"We're not perfect," says Mr. Walters, "we've made a lot of mistakes. But I don't spend all my time talking about our errors, beating my breast about the various small things we've done wrong. The United States has fought three great wars in this century, and we haven't annexed one square inch of territory, we haven't made one human being become an American. And unlike any other nation in history, we have financed back into competition with us our defeated enemies and our crippled friends."

"So I'm just not one of these people who's filled with guilt about the United States. Churchill once said that the Marshall Plan was the single most unselfish act in history. When the Marshall Plan started, the gross national product of the nations that make up the European Community was 6 percent of that of the United States. Today it's larger than ours. If that's the action of a self-interested, selfish nation, words have lost their meaning."

It's a curious fact that this staunch patriot did not grow up in the United States. He was born in New York, but his father was English, and from the

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age of 6 to the age of 16 Vernon Walters lived in Europe, attending schools in England and France.

He returned to the United States to work in an insurance firm his father had once managed. It was not that he had any particular interest in insurance, but his father was determined that one of the Walters boys would go into the business, and the onus fell on Vernon.

After five years, he made his escape by enlisting in the Army.

"Adolf Hitler did at least one good deed in his life," wrote Mr. Walters in "Silent Missions," his 1978 memoirs. "He got me out of my father's insurance company."

En route to Morocco in 1942 as part of an intelligence unit, Mr. Walters realized he had found his life's work.

"There was a quiet comprehension that I had found the path I was seeking. Why and how I came to this realization ... I cannot explain. I only know ... that I had found my place in life. I was not to lose this conviction in the 34 years that were to follow in the Army."

In those 34 years, Mr. Walters rose through the ranks to lieutenant general, serving as an aide to Averell Harriman at the Marshall Plan Headquarters in Paris, with Gen. Dwight Eisenhower at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers — Europe), special projects officer at the NATO Standing Group in Washington, and military attache to Italy, Brazil and France.

It was in Brazil that Mr. Walters was embroiled in one of the major controversies of his career. He was accused of aiding and abetting the military coup of 1964 that overthrew the left-leaning president, Joao Goulart, an accusation he denied and denies.

"I was a very well-informed spectator," he says. "There were people who did think that because I was well informed that I had some part in organizing it. My reply to them was, 'What advice could an American colonel without any experience in coups give Brazilian generals who had overthrown two presidents in the previous five years?'"

"I was penalized because I was doing what a good attache should do, because I knew [of the developing coup] and reported it to the U.S. government. I was not a participant. The president-elect of Brazil who just died [Tancredo Neves], a representative of the forces that were defeated in 1964, sent me a warm telegram of congratulations on my appointment to the United Nations. He clearly did not think I had any part in the coup."

Mr. Walters found himself in an equally hot situation in 1972, as deputy CIA director during Watergate. Six weeks into that job, he and CIA director Richard Helms were asked by H.R. Haldeman and John Erlichman to try to head off the FBI investigation of the case by telling FBI director Patrick Gray that CIA operations in Mexico were being jeopardized by that investigation.

That message was relayed by Mr. Walters. ("It did not occur to me," he wrote in his book, "that the Chief of Staff to the President might be asking me to do something that was illegal or wrong.") But he refused to provide Mr. Gray with a written statement to that effect, and after his own investigation into the situation, he told John Dean that there was no risk to the CIA.

Though his account of events did not go undisputed, Mr. Walters emerged unscathed from the Watergate scandal, surviving some 20 committee testimonies and eventually being awarded a medal by the CIA.

"I was asked to do something that would have irretrievably compromised the CIA," he says. "I refused to do it, and I was still in office three years later ... and I've been confirmed unanimously by the Senate for every job I've had since. My integrity emerged quite plainly."

It is not hard to understand why, with such experiences behind him — not to mention his encounters with Francisco Franco, Fidel Castro and the North Vietnamese — Mr. Walters is unintimidated by the U.N. post and its high burnout factor.

"I've had a number of harrowing experiences in my life, much more harrowing than that," he says. "I'll be there as long as the president wants me to stay."

"Dick Walters is not a compulsive bureaucrat, always looking for opportunities," says Alexander Haig. "I've never known him to promote himself at the expense of others."

"I guess it goes to show," concludes Mr. Haig, "that while it may be the exception, there is justice in Washington."

