

# Playing the U.N. Game with Gusto

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**SUMMARY: Vernon Walters comes well-prepared to be ambassador to the United Nations and President Reagan's chief diplomatic troubleshooter. A retired general, a linguist and an irrepressible raconteur, Walters's wide experience includes serving U.S. leaders for more than 40 years, often in roles requiring discretion. His style as ambassador is far different from that of his predecessor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and he draws darts from some of her proteges.**

United States-bashing at this modern-day tower of Babel, the United Nations, is on the wane, surfacing only now and again in speeches by particularly antagonistic delegates, says a satisfied Ambassador Vernon A. Walters. "The last time I heard the old kind of hellfire rhetoric was from a North Korean. . . . He says the U.S. goes around the world ravaging, smashing, destroying governments, burning, raping, murdering," the globe-trotting diplomatic troubleshooter recounts. "During the speech, I get a note from the Italian delegate that says: 'Now I know what you do when you travel.'"

Keeping tabs on the whereabouts of Vernon "Dick" Walters, who continues to be sent by President Reagan on sensitive missions to foreign lands even as he serves in the high-visibility post of U.N. envoy, is a popular pastime for journalists and other information junkies who want to figure where news will likely break next. Trouble is, despite his 6-foot-3 height, his wide girth and his unmistakable Brooklynese, it is tough to tail the shadowy Walters, who still adheres to the idea from his CIA days that the best cover is quick and unannounced movement.

Only later, for example, did it come to light that Walters may have been in Fiji before and during last year's coup d'etat, as ousted Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra contended in calling for a congressional investigation. The charge is the latest to underscore the sometimes curious role in foreign policy played by the retired three-star Army general over the course of an extraordinary 47-year career in government as top-level aide, soldier and spy.

The latest sighting of the peripatetic Walters was at the end of April, on a whirlwind tour of 13 Latin American countries that sent off ripples of speculation that Washington was seeking regional support for a new move against Panama's Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

He was back at the U.S. Mission in New York for a week in early May, where he sat for an interview in his office, which is filled with the memorabilia that tell his life story: autographed photos from the six presidents he has served, flags from most of the 130 countries he has visited as a Reagan emissary, strange lime green and baby blue artifacts from obscure corners of the world most people would not know even exist. "I went to Africa in March and tried to pick up a few I've missed. Guinea, Principe, Burkina Faso, Benin. . . . I still haven't hit Gambia."

Then Walters was off again, this time to the Middle East, part of an ongoing U.S. effort to resolve the Iran-Iraq War. "I'm going to all the countries in the Gulf region, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Iran — no, not Iran. To the Iranians, I'm a satanic viper," he says in the slightly bemused tone of a U.N. veteran.

Name-calling does not seem to test the patience of the unflappable Walters. Neither does the virulent anti-Americanism, the bloated bureaucracy, the hypocrisy, the sense of impotence — all the qualities that led his predecessors to call the United Nations everything from a "dangerous place" (Daniel Patrick Moynihan) to a "Turkish steam bath" (Jeane J. Kirkpatrick).

After all, life at the United Nations cannot be more of a challenge than, say, accompanying President Harry S. Truman to Wake Island to fire Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur in 1951; refereeing, in fluent Spanish and with a mouthful of glass, when an angry mob attacked Vice President Richard M. Nixon's limousine in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1958; smuggling Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in and out of Paris 15 times for secret talks with the Chinese and Vietnamese; serving as deputy CIA director at the height of the Watergate scandal; or, more recently, helping secure the release of American hostages from Shiite militants in Beirut.

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Says Walters: "Many of the things I did I can't talk about. One of them is getting people out of jail. It's the kind of thing you can't talk about if you ever want to do it again." But, pausing, he says: "I've been to Damascus four times on the hostages. One month after the last time I went, Mr. [Charles] Glass escaped. His chains suddenly fell off. The last time I know of that happening was with St. Peter, when he was in prison in Rome."

In spite of the discretion his duties have demanded, the gregarious name-dropper regales all who cross his path with a legendary stock of stories. "He has the history of the world at his fingertips," says Ambassador Herbert S. Okun, Walters's deputy. "He's an institution himself." Even so, Walters reveals precious little of substance; he calls the tactic "constructive ambiguity."

Hence the title of Walters's 1978 autobiography, "Silent Missions," in which he writes of translating for President Eisenhower and Charles de Gaulle as they spoke in their bathrobes at Rambouillet Castle near Paris, of accompanying W. Averell Harriman to meetings with Iran's Premier Mohammad Mosaddeq just before he was overthrown by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, of wiring to Washington details about the

Brazilian coup led by Gen. Humberto Castelo Branco the week before it happened.

Still, an air of mystery surrounds these and other Walters escapades.

That is probably because a conversation with him leaves little room for probing questions. It is more like listening to a coruscating Bob Hope monologue: He knows just when to pause, when to deliver the punch line. He waits for the inevitable laugh, a sly smile emerges from his capacious jowls, and he charges off on another topic without missing a beat.

"The Soviets are experiencing very serious internal problems," Walters starts off somberly. "There's a man in the Soviet Union who has been paying for an automobile for three years and one day he finally gets a call from the dealer. The man gets very excited and asks the dealer when the car will be delivered. The dealer tells him Dec. 7, 1992. The man asks, 'In the morning or the afternoon?' The dealer says, 'Why do you want to know?' And the man answers, 'Because the plumber is coming in the morning.'

"Let me tell you a Soviet story about how *glasnost* works," he continues. "A man goes to the corner stand to buy a kvass [a popular Soviet drink] and notices that the price has gone up to 1 ruble from 50 kopecks. He asks the proprietor why. The proprietor says, '50 kopecks for the kvass, 50 kopecks for *glasnost*.' So the man hands over a ruble and receives 50 kopecks in change. 'Why the change?' the man asks. And the proprietor says, 'We're out of kvass.'"

His gift for languages — Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, Russian, Italian and numerous dialects thereof — and his close-up look at scores of the world's leaders have enabled him to perfect imitations of such disparate characters as Pope John Paul II, the late Gen. Francisco Franco, Fidel Castro and Augusto Pinochet Ugarte.

Walters says that his linguistic abilities — acquired at schools in England and France before he dropped out at 16, and then back in his native New York as an insurance claims adjuster in the city's ethnic enclaves — launched his career. But he is sensitive to criticism that he has been little more than "America's top messenger boy," as *The New Republic* once put it. Though Walters has never held a policy-making position in government, he is certainly more than just a courier.

Reagan brought him out of a comfortable retirement in Palm Beach, Fla., to be his roving representative in 1981. Walters made forays to Latin American military dictatorships to explain that democratization and human rights improvements had to accompany normalized relations with the United States. Many analysts believe the message carried clout coming from a man known as "the general" rather than from a striped-pants type. He also visited Africa, working to strengthen ties with Sudan, Tunisia and Morocco and to isolate Libya.

Often, Walters trades on a personal connection. He has known King Hassan II of Morocco since World War II, when he gave the 13-year-old prince a ride in an American tank. He has close ties to Brazil's military, having once been a tentmate of Castelo Branco in Italy. But even at a first meeting, Walters is convivial and disarming, speaking Portuguese and handing out chocolate bars in talks with Angola's Marxist President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and impressing Castro so much that he regretted Walters was an opponent.

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When Walters began lobbying for the U.N. post ("I guess I lusted after it in my heart"), some said he had finally tired of his surreptitious style and wanted a turn in the limelight. "I held a press conference when I was nominated, and the question about operating in the shadows came up. And I said, 'Look, I have two footlockers full of speeches I made as deputy director of central intelligence. I've never traveled under a false name, with a false passport and, unlike some of the people in this room, I've never registered in a hotel under a false name.' That was the last question I had on that particular subject."

Now, he is free to talk about his work. "The most important thing I could do here is help end the Gulf war," he says. "We're trying to get agreement on an arms embargo against Iran, but it's an uphill fight. All we're trying to do is stop the killing. . . . They won't miss them now, but in 15 years, they'll weep for this lost generation." Invoking a favorite locution, he continues: "Look, I've been to war. I know what war is like. It's not just an abstract thing to me." (He was stationed in North Africa and Italy during World War II, and in Greece during the civil war; he served in both Korea and Vietnam.)

Abstractions do not preoccupy this man. His most satisfying moment, he says, was the resolution condemning the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which passed in the last session by a 125-19 vote, the most support the resolution has ever attracted. Another high point was his successful effort earlier this year to secure a visit by a U.N. human rights inspection team to Cuba, a move that was defeated by one vote last year.

Even if he were more lithe, Walters would have had trouble filling the shoes of predecessor Kirkpatrick, the tough-talking academic who raised hackles in the United Nations and acquired star status in conservative circles with her ringing defense of the West. Many in the United Nations, however, think Walters has the better touch for the job. Kirkpatrick herself once bemoaned the fact that she was an "intellectual in a world of bureaucrats."

Walters has never claimed to be a towering intellectual figure, and with his prized reputation as a fixer, he is no ideologue. The social milieu of the United Nations, which Kirkpatrick spurned, suits his talents

as a masterly raconteur. "If you're the American, and you don't go to some reception, they read something into it you may not intend."

He spends much of his time schmoozing, even with the Soviets and the Nicaraguans. "About the only ones I don't talk to are the Iranians and the Libyans. You have to lobby."

"He genuinely likes people," says Okun. "He's one of the most gifted linguists alive. He knows these countries, the geography and the ethnic differences. He's curious and has a youthful enthusiasm. And he tends to know more about foreign countries than the specialists on the staff."

**W**alters, in short, is playing the U.N. game with gusto. Which is precisely what riles the Kirkpatrick proteges, who see the fissures between the two ambassadors as a matter of principle, not, as Walters says with a dismissive scowl, "style and personality."

"My impression is that the overall position of the U.S. Mission has deteriorated," says Ambassador Charles M. Lichenstein, Kirkpatrick's former deputy. "Walters defers too much to the career Foreign Service people around him. And he's always away. When we were there, we tried to get the principal interests of U.S. policy on the U.N. agenda. We tried to find ways of asserting ourselves."

Now the director of the United Nations Assessment Project at the Heritage Foundation, Lichenstein has just completed an analysis of voting patterns in the 42nd General Assembly, which ended in December. "The coincidence of voting with the United States fell to an historic low, 18.6 percent," he says. "That's a 27 percent drop over the previous year."

Ambassador Alan L. Keyes, another former Kirkpatrick deputy who resigned as assistant secretary of state for international organizations last fall, notes that the coincidence figure fell "even though the U.S. took weaker stands, fewer no votes and more abstentions." Keyes, now a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, thinks this was particularly evident in resolutions dealing with Israel. According to Keyes, U.S. "principled opposition to the use of the Security Council as an anti-Israel bludgeon has lapsed."

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Walters says gaining support for U.S. positions has been made difficult because "my entire tenure has taken place against the backdrop of a U.S. refusal to pay its dues," a move by Congress to extract a series of reforms from the world body. The United Nations and its associated agencies spend about \$4.5 billion a year; the United States pays 25 percent of that, more than twice what the Soviets pay and the equivalent of what the entire Third World pays. Yet the 159-member General Assembly, under a one-nation, one-vote system, controls how the money is spent. The idea of withholding dues was to get the body to adopt a voting system on budgets weighted in accord with how much a country contributes financially.

Walters has successfully lobbied the White House to release more than half of the dues. "We did get some of the reforms," he says. "A budget must now be approved by consensus [giving each member veto power]. A hiring freeze and a 15 percent personnel cut is in place. And for the first time we have a budget this year that is smaller in real terms than the last one." Walters's efforts in turning the U.S. spigot back on also have drawn fire from people such as Keyes, who dismisses the U.N. reforms as "business as usual."

Okun says that Walters has chosen a less confrontational tack in pursuing U.S. interests. "He is an internationalist, a man of alliances. He went to Europe to administer the Marshall Plan. He wants to place us back into a role of world leadership."

Says Walters: "My instructions from the president were to reform it, not wreck it. As an old soldier, I don't like to give up ground by default. I like to stay and fight." Certainly, he is not squishy in dealing with U.S. adversaries. Asked about the flag of South Vietnam displayed in his office, Walters calls it "unfinished business."

On his availability to undertake silent missions for future presidents, Walters is typically circumspect. "I would like to say I will retire and settle down," he says, "but, you know, I tempt easily."

— David Brock in New York

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