**Marci McDonald**

# VERNON WALTERS:
# A MASTER OF SHADOW DIPLOMACY

The assignment was an unusual one f or an ambassador to the United Nations. In early April the White House sent its UN envoy, retired Lt.-Gen. Vernon Walters, on a secret mission to Europe to obtain allied co-operation for the United States' planned bombing of Libya. For Walters, 69 -- formerly the Reagan administration's official roving troubleshooter -- it was another mission in a 40-year career of behind-the-scenes diplomacy that has taken him to most of the postwar flashpoints. Later, some analysts credited him with convincing Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to permit U.S. F-111s based in Britain to take part in the raid. Others criticized him for failing to win President François Mitterrand's approval to use French airspace. And still others claimed that all he really did was inform allied leaders of a decision already made. Said Walters of his mission's mixed results: "If there had been real chances of success, I think somebody else would have gone than me."

That candid admission underlined Walter's curious and sometimes controversial role in American foreign policy. Under five Presidents, he has secretly negotiated with world leaders and guerrilla chiefs. In 1968 he smuggled Henry Kissinger, then assistant for national security affairs, into Paris for secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese. Last year he secured the release of American hostage Benjamin Weir from Shiite militants in Beirut. In 1984 he talked Roberto d'Aubuisson, political leader of El Salvador's far right, out of a plan reported by U.S. intelligence agents to assassinate U.S. ambassador Thomas Pickering.

Walter's wit and his talents as a raconteur in seven foreign languages have helped him win the attention of leaders on both the left and the right. The weekly New Republic once described Walters as "America's top messenger boy." That nickname displeased Walters, who is conscious of charges that he has always been an implementer, never a formulator, of foreign policy. "It's been said that I'm a guy who speaks a half-dozen languages and thinks in none," he said.

But to the surprise of many, Walters has not followed the UN-bashing line of his predecessor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, or her disciples who still control state department policy. Before his arrival, many diplomats predicted that he had been sent to preside over the dismantling of the United Nations. But last fall Walters won admiration for the way in which he defeated a resolution to invite Palestine Liberation organization leader Yasser Arafat to the UN's 40th anniversary celebrations, where President Ronald Reagan and other world leaders were scheduled to speak. "He suggested it would undermine the efforts to recoup U.S. support for the UN," said Canadian Ambassador to the UN Stephen Lewis. "The vigor with which he launched his opposition wasn't ideological, it was out of concern for the institution." Said Walters of his UN mission: "It's a very important forum and it shouldn't be abandoned."

Instead, last month Walters displayed another tactic for changing the UN to Washington's liking: he warned that countries would get less American foreign aid if they voted against the United States in the General Assembly. Indeed, in the past year, determined to win Washington friends at the UN, Walters has joined the cocktail circuit Kirkpatrick shunned. He can, according to one observer, "work a reception regaling people in seven languages with insider stories that cover the history of the globe."

In fact, it was Walter's linguistic abilities -- acquired at schools in England and France before he dropped out at 16, and then as an insurance claims adjuster in New York's ethnic neighborhoods -- which first launched him on the military career that has made him a firsthand witness to much of postwar history. Drafted in 1941, he left the army 35 years later as a lieutenant-general without ever having commanded a platoon in combat.

His multilingualism earned a post as aide-de-camp to Gen. Mark Clark in Rome, where he oversaw the liberation of the city. During the 1950s Walters was interpreter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower on trips abroad. And he was present when U.S. envoys informed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh of his 1953 overthrow in favor of the late Shah of Iran. In 1958 Walters was translating for then-vice-president Richard Nixon in Caracas when rioting Venezuelans attacked their car. His ability to keep the angry crowds at bay in fluent Spanish so impressed Nixon that he promoted Walters' career.

Despatched as U.S. defence attaché to Brazil in 1962, Walters frequently dined with Gen. Humberto Castelo Branco, who two years later overthrew the leftist

government of President Joao Goulart. Walters later denied helping to orchestrate the coup, despite the fact that a week before, his diplomatic cables had predicted it with enough accuracy to name the date. Within a year of it, he was promoted to brigadier-general.

Later, when he had become President, Nixon named Walters deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. A month after his 1972 appointment the Watergate scandal broke, but Walters was one of the few figures to emerge with his reputation intact. After he discovered the White House orders to block an FBI investigation into CIA activities were part of a coverup effort, he refused to co-operate. He was later rewarded with a CIA medal for preserving the agency's independence. But as CIA deputy chief, Walters cultivated contacts with other undercover organizations -- including Chile's notorious DINA secret police agency. Critics charge that he knew in advance of a successful 1976 plan by two DINA agents to assassinate Orlando Letelier, the former Chilean foreign minister in the leftist Salvador Allende government, who was living in exile in Washington.

After Reagan appointed him ambassador-at-large in 1981, he created more controversy. He informed the Guatemalan government of the administrations' desire to restore aid to the country, where the death squads of Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia had earned the nations the reputation as the most repressive in the hemisphere. He dismissed questions about human rights violations with the reply, "There will be human rights problems in the year 3000 with the governments of Mars and the moon." Walters autobiography, *Silent Missions*, repeatedly champions Latin American military governments as bulwarks against "a brutal Communist takeover."

He is an unrepentant cold warrior who still praises the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as one of America's "noblest and most unselfish wars." He justified the April bombing of Libya with the rationale, "One of the things we Americans have to do is work less hard to loved and harder to be respected."

Walters' career has put him on a first-name basis with most of the world's leaders. But it has also given him useful knowledge of the skeletons in global closets, which has served him well at the UN. Some observers considered Walters's lobbying for the UN post as a desire to emerge from the shadowy world of the political underground for a turn in the limelight. But others said that his style there is no different than it has ever been. Having perfected the art of appearing to be candid while revealing nothing.

Walters continues to leave many diplomats unsure of what he is doing at the UN. Walters tactily acknowledges that lifelong tactic and has even given it a name: “constructive ambiguity.”

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Source : *Maclean Hunter*, June 9, 1986.