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VERNON WALTERS, BACK IN HIS WORLD; THE WELL-TRAVELED DIPLOMAT, ON STAGE AT THE UNITED NATIONS

UNITED NATIONS, N.Y. Hot damn, it's Turkish national day: Time yet again for the sort of backbreaking ballet known on this international sliver of east Manhattan as the "diplomatic reception." And on this stage Twinkletoes is a lumbering gentleman in a bad brown suit, the U.S. representative to the United Nations, Lt. Gen. Vernon Anthony Walters.

"I really don't mind these things," Walters explains on the way out of the elevator. "I wanna kill 'em with kindness."

This passes for a major diplomatic backflip among the striped-pants set. His predecessor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, was no less a representative of Ronald Reagan's more hardline instincts, but she just about killed 'em with lectures. Kirkpatrick was a wallflower at the East Side dance. And they just hate that in Turtle Bay.

Half a nanosecond before hitting the door and the outstretched mitt of the Turkish representative, Walters transforms his meaty visage into an awesome and genial smile. What a grin. The sheer length of it. And what a shake. It's one of those old double-fisted moves once favored by the Elks lodge and the Brooklyn Dodgers: right hand pumping, left hand gripping the other fellow's wrist. Fantastic. Walters wishes Turkey all the best and begins making a slow orbit around the room.

Next stop, Japan: After more than four decades of secret foreign missions for the Army and the CIA, Walters can wrap his tongue around seven foreign languages -- Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, Russian and Italian. So it comes as something of a surprise to hear Walters barking in Japanese:

"Konichiwa . . . non des ka . . . etc."

"It's nice to have someone speak your language," says the Japanese representative, as Walters bids him "Sayonara . . . etc."

The champagne cart stops at a huddle including three French diplomats and Walters. The French each take a glass -- though they seem unimpressed with the vintage. Walters, a lifetime teetotaler, clutches a club soda. All the while they are back-slapping and phoo-phooing away, Gallic style.

"Oui, oui, oui . . . ce n'a fait rien . . . etc."

Walters is a man in love with his work. His ability to learn languages and his proximity to scores of world leaders since World War II have been such that he has developed near-perfect imitations of Pope John Paul II, Franco and Castro. He is said to do a mean Augusto Pinochet.

Walters is a lifelong bachelor “who married the U.S. government a long time ago.” He says, mixing the metaphor, that his life has been “one long hot fudge sundae.” There is none of Kirkpatrick’s eminent disdain, her way of picking her nails and glowering into the middle distance.

Walters turns a bend leaving several small African nations and South Korea in his wake. Here comes the big meeting. The quotidian summit. Walters’ Russian counterpart at the United Nations is Oleg Aleksandrovich Troyanovsky, a smiling Slav. The two men loom above the canape’s. They chat easily, as if the superpower struggle were a kind of inside joke. They have known each other since 1955, when they were interpreters at Eisenhower’s Geneva summit.

“Kak dela, Oleg!..... Never change, tovarisch..... do svidanya . . . etc.”

Walters stops and chats with everyone in the room, representatives of tin-pots, greenhorns and dictatorships of every possible variety. The place looks like a reunion of the old Coke commercial. Would Walters like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony? “Diplomacy,” he says, “is about making friends, not losing them.”

The only one in the room he snubs is Said Rajaie Khorassani, the Iranian representative.

“I spotted him from across the room,” says Walters, the smile melting now into his capacious jowl. “That’s one man we’re just not doing business with.”

Vernon Walters, like Graham Greene’s Pyle, is the quintessential Quiet American, a perennial player at the flashpoints of history. At 68, no one has been closer to this country’s foreign affairs since World War II. And yet, until the president nominated him for the UN post, only the cognoscenti of foreign policy knew much about his extraordinary career. Hence the title of his autobiography, *Silent Missions*.

“I think I tell a lot in that book,” says Walters, “but believe me, I couldn’t tell the half of it.” Not only would he be betraying military and intelligence secrets, but also his image of smoke and mirrors. Instead Walters relies on a stock of anecdotes, which themselves are the stuff of legend:

He delivered a crucial letter to Marshal Tito from Gen. Mark Clark. He translated for Eisenhower and Charles de Gaulle as they kibitzed in bathrobes at Rambouillet Castle near Paris. He took notes while Harry Truman berated Douglas MacArthur on Wake Island. He accompanied W. Averell Harriman during his meetings with Iran’s Mohammed Mossadegh.

When angry mobs attacked Richard Nixon’s limousine in Caracas, Walters was there with the vice president in the back seat. “Nixon never lost his cool in that car,” says Walters. “They were beating on the roof and throwing stones.”

With a mouth full of glass, Walters translated as Nixon challenged the crowd to debate. Nixon remained a patron to Walters from then on. The two men now commemorate May 13, 1958, as their “rock ’n ’ roll day.”

Before the United States and China decided to embrace in public, Walters played the private courier. And during the U.S.'s secret negotiations with North Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho, he commandeered Georges Pompidou's plane and managed to spirit Henry Kissinger out of Europe undetected. "Nobody does for me the things that you do," Kissinger said to him.

As deputy director of the CIA, Walters resisted White House appeals through John Dean to involve the agency in the Watergate cover-up. "There were just some things I wouldn't do," he says.

During the Carter years Walters worked as an international arms consultant to Environmental Energy Systems Inc., based in Alexandria. In 1981 he was paid \$300,000 for putting the company in contact with the right people in the Moroccan government for a \$190 million tank-modernization deal -- which eventually fell through. Walters had known King Hassan for decades. During World War II he gave the 13-year-old prince a ride in an American tank.

Walters also worked as a \$1,000-a-day consultant for Basic Resources Services Inc., a Luxembourg-based consortium, on an oil deal in Guatemala.

Jimmy Carter's retirement brought Walters out of his. As Reagan's ambassador-at-large, Walters visited 108 countries and "met the heads of state in almost every one of them." When right-wing Salvadoran leader Roberto d'Aubuisson was reportedly involved in a plot to assassinate U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Walters went south to warn d'Aubuisson of "serious consequences." A few months ago, he visited Syria and helped free Presbyterian clergyman Benjamin Weir after 16 months of captivity by Shiite militants in Beirut.

Walters made his initial success through his facility with languages. In his memoirs, Kissinger wrote that Walters' "skill at translating was phenomenal; he was also a great actor, able to render not only the words but the intonation and attitude of the speaker."

As an emissary he won praise from two former CIA directors. William Colby describes Walters as a "totally loyal" public servant who "could make contact with a missing Eskimo and learn the language going in on the plane"; Richard Helms says, "I can't think of anyone who has had a more extraordinary career. Who's been to all the places that Dick Walters has been to?"

Walters has also won admiration from regimes he despises. On a secret mission to Havana in 1982, he visited Castro at Alexander Haig's request. Although Walters had spent four years with the CIA -- an agency that Cuba has accused of trying to kill its leader on 25 separate occasions -- Castro was impressed. According to Walters, "Castro turned to one of his aides, and said, 'What a pity he's on the other side.'"

"Of course," he says, "you can't take a compliment too seriously from a guy who has killed thousands." And he denies the United States ever tried to kill Castro. "It's not true," he says. "I'm against that stuff for three reasons: It's against the law of God, it's against the law of man, and it generally doesn't work."

As Walters sits behind his desk at the U.S. Mission and grips a roll of his beloved Necco wafers, he scoffs at his new-found stature: "I never sought a high profile. But it's ridiculous to say I was a national secret. I never wore a disguise or traveled under a false name."

"The week of the U.N.'s 40th anniversary celebration, I was all over television and radio with Secretary of State George Shultz and Reagan. So I went to a reception at the Museum of Modern Art with Ed Koch and a young woman came up to me with a pad and she said, 'Can I ask you a few questions?' So I said, 'Sure, c'mon over here. What's your first question.' So she said, 'Well . . . who are you?'"

But the anecdote has the tinny sound of the canned, the tape titled "self-deprecating." Walters is the product of a lifetime in the political secrets business, and he has the peculiar talent of appearing candid while at the same time revealing almost nothing.

He is the son of a well-to-do insurance executive and a solicitous mother, grew up in the New York area and, after age 6, in western Europe. He graduated from a French lycée and attended Stonyhurst College in England until he dropped out at 16 to work with his father. Walters was less than thrilled with the business life and grateful when he was drafted into the Army.

Having picked up languages like so much lint, Walters says he was sleeping in his barracks at Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont when in the middle of the night the FBI "asked" him to undertake his first intelligence mission. An agent flashed a light in Walters' eyes and asked him to work the ski slopes and look for any German agents.

"That was the start of it," he says, "and there haven't been too many vacations." When he was not doing the bidding of the Army and nine presidents, Walters lived alone, with his sister or his mother, who died in 1964. These days he lives in the ambassador's suite at the Waldorf-Astoria.

Walters has better taste in candy than he does in art. The Metropolitan Museum lends paintings to the delegate's apartment, but Walters asked that a Modigliani and several others be removed from his sight. "I can look at a Modigliani in a museum, but I'm not sure I can look at it at 7:30 in the morning."

He has never married -- a fact that has intrigued his peers and not a few of his antagonists. Winston Lord, former head of the Council on Foreign Relations and now U.S. ambassador to China, once called Walters "our James Bondo," but this 007, it turns out, is invulnerable to Mata Hari:

"James Bond carried on an amorous life that would have caused me to fire him had he worked for me. Anybody with that kind of life has a vulnerability that can be easily reached."

"I went to France in 1968 at a very sensitive time in Franco-American relations. Long after the head of French military intelligence retired he said to me, 'You know when you came here we were convinced the Americans had sent you

over to stir up the armed forces for NATO and against de Gaulle. I watched you very closely and the fact that you were a bachelor gave us two handles we could get on you: girls and boys. When neither worked out, we decided you were like the traditional bishop -- never in your own diocese.'

"I said, 'Jacques, didn't you realize I knew I was living in the window of the Galeries Lafayette?'"

Walters is not a figure of overwhelming intellectual stature. He is an implementer, the ultimate operative, not a visionary. "It's been said that I'm a guy who speaks a half-dozen languages and thinks in none," he says.

Walters has an eminently clear view of life focused especially by his Catholicism and conservative politics. There are few ambiguities in his vision of the world. The United States is a force for the good; the war in Vietnam was, to Walters, a "battlefield of freedom" and "one of our noblest fights."

Unlike Kirkpatrick he is unlikely to pursue a career on the opinion pages and academic journals when he leaves the United Nations. Nor is he about to run for public office. He is more likely to retire to his house in Palm Beach, Fla.

Ideologically, however, Walters bears great resemblance to his predecessor, especially when it comes to distinguishing authoritarian regimes from totalitarian ones. He has been an unrelenting supporter of friendly right-wing dictatorships in South and Central America – Pinochet's Chile and the former military junta in Argentina among others.

At a press conference in Guatemala four years ago, Walters defended critics of Gen. Romeo Lucas Garcia by saying, "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."

While at the CIA (between 1972-1976) Walters dealt closely with DINA, the Chilean military police. On Sept. 21, 1976, two DINA agents assassinated Orlando Letelier, Chile's foreign minister under the deposed socialist leader Salvador Allende. Some critics, especially former associates of Letelier, accused Walters of having knowledge of an imminent DINA mission in Washington and not making the information available to the FBI.

John Dinges, coauthor with Saul Landau of *Assassination on Embassy Row*, says, "There's nothing at all to suggest that Walters or the CIA helped the Chileans carry out the mission. But Walters did meet with DINA head Manuel Contreras in Washington six weeks before the assassination. That made people wonder."

For his part, Walters denies he knew anything about a DINA mission in Washington -- a view supported by the prosecutor in the case, Eugene Propper.

When Walters' name first surfaced for the U.N. job, Shultz, Kirkpatrick's occasional antagonist, reportedly advised the president to prevent the UN ambassador from holding a Cabinet rank and sitting in on National Security Council meetings at the White House. But Walters did not take the post until he was assured of status equal to his predecessors'.

“To accept a job that had shrunk in importance specifically for me would have been very difficult,” he says. “It would have sent a message to the UN saying ‘don’t listen to this man seriously, he’s not as important as his predecessors.’ And against the background of the withdrawal from UNESCO it would have been interpreted as a further lowering of American interest in the UN.”

On his first day on the Security Council Walters glowered as the Vietnamese representative lectured the United States on the issues of Namibia. When it came his time to speak, Walters fairly roared at the Vietnamese, concluding, “I hope the Vietnamese delegate’s sympathy for countries occupied by foreign powers extends to the neighboring people of Cambodia.”

Most of Walters’ stylistic changes have not been so much at the speaker’s microphone but at private meetings and cocktail receptions.

“Walters has changed the style of the mission,” says Charles W. Maynes, editor of *Foreign Policy*. “He believes more in a diplomatic approach than beating the rhetorical stick. Walters’ appointee Joseph Reed made his first appearance before the host committee and said the administration wanted the UN to stay in New York. That comes in contrast to Kirkpatrick’s man, Charles Lichenstein, saying, in essence, ‘If you want to leave, go ahead. We’ll wave to you at the dock.’”

“His biggest drawback, and it’s not unique to him, is that he has most of his experience outside the Third World. Big league American diplomats are not quite used to an environment like the UN, where, say, India is more important than France.”

As he walks down First Avenue to meet with a delegation of Afghan rebels, he will not dwell much on Kirkpatrick except to say that, “I’m just as tough when the United States is attacked as she is, but I’m more given to seduction.”

“I go to parties in the service of my country. Anyone who doesn’t think you influence someone at a cocktail party has never been to one. A lot of these delegates, for better or worse, feel they’ve been neglected by the United States. I’m engaged in trying to repair that.”

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