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Diplomacy is still generally considered the domain of Foreign Ministries and Ambassadors, even if this model has come under increasing scrutiny. This article is a timely study that illustrates the importance of ‘informal’ or ‘unofficial diplomacy’ through the role of a private American citizen, Norman Cousins, and his involvement as a go-between during high-level talks on the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1962-1963. Cousins is presented as a perfect example of Track Two diplomacy, a form of mediation employed in crisis-ridden situations where dialogue needs to continue outside of formal (log-jammed) diplomatic negotiations. Allen Pietrobon makes the not unjust claim that this episode marks “the first, and arguably the most successful, use of a ‘citizen diplomat’ during the Cold War” (60). This is hard to refute, although it does depend on a restricted understanding of the term ‘citizen diplomat,’ which will be discussed below.

One of the key issues in exploring citizen diplomacy is being able to discern the motivations that lead to the commitment, and to what extent they are transparently identifiable. A diplomat is involved in diplomacy foremost as someone in the service of the state, and other motivations (ideological, financial, social, religious) may well play a role in any negotiations but do not determine the professional identity of that individual. A citizen diplomat has no such default identity, and motivations then take on a greater meaning – and potentially a greater challenge for the historian. With Cousins, there seem to have been two principal impulses for his association with the LTBT talks. The first is clear – his rejection of nuclear weapons and his pivotal role in founding the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1957. This would explain his credibility for both the Soviet leadership (which was keen on an American who criticized his government’s stand on nuclear weapons) and the Kennedy White House (which was keen to achieve a breakthrough on nuclear negotiations following the Cuban Missile Crisis).

The second is slightly more obscure. Pietrobon recounts that in 1962 (or already earlier?) Cousins was discussing a plan for “communicating with Moscow for the cause of a workable peace” (64). His sparring partner in this endeavor was Father Felix Morligh, the president of Pro Deo University in Rome. Pietrobon
quotes Cousins’s own comment that “through a strange combination of circumstances, I found myself an emissary of Pope John [XXIII] to the Kremlin” (64). Following this brief insight, both the Vatican and Morlion largely disappear from the narrative. Yet Morlion, a Belgian Dominican, is a character who should not be taken at face value. He founded the Centre d’information et publication Pro Deo in 1932 in Brussels, an anti-totalitarian propaganda organization that sought to make use of the latest methods of communication to spread the Word. Going into exile in 1940, first to Lisbon and then thanks to William J. Donovan and the Office of Strategic Services to New York, Morlion’s trans-European Catholic underground began providing reports on occupied Europe. In late 1944 Donovan sent Morlion to Rome to work out of the Vatican of Pope Pius XII, who, in the words of Douglas Waller, was “one of the war’s most cunning fence-straddlers.”1 It was there that Morlion founded the School of Mass Communication Media, the graduates of which would form the backbone of Luigi Gedda’s Catholic Action. A prominent figure in the anti-communist campaign that focused on the 1948 Italian elections, Morlion was soon on the radar of other determined anti-communist zealots such as Henry Luce and C.D. Jackson, who would go on to lead an affiliate, the American Council for the International Promotion of Democracy under God. By the early 1950s Morlion, now running the U.S.-orientated University of the Social Sciences Pro Deo in Rome, was clearly implicated in the same CIA-linked circles as the National Committee for a Free Europe (the nominally private organization that ran Radio Free Europe). Thousands of dollars were channeled to Pro Deo during that decade, overseen by Luce’s Catholic wife, Clair Booth, in her capacity as U.S. ambassador to Italy in the same period.2

This must sound like its heading towards some kind of revelation that the Cousins mission of 1962-1963 was after all part of a CIA plan. Was Cousins the ‘citizen diplomat’ in fact involved in a covert manoeuver to outwit the Soviets on arms control? After all, Cousins himself described it as a “strange combination of circumstances” (64) that he ended up in Moscow, which in memoirs is often a euphemism for ‘I don’t want to tell you what really happened.’ There is also the interesting aside that “Morlion called his Soviet contacts” (64) to pave the way for Cousins’s Moscow trip, a curious detail for someone who had been running an anti-Communist campaign financed by the Americans over the previous two decades.

Without wanting to disappoint, it would be a gross mistake to come to such a simplistic conclusion. Valerie Aubourg points out in a 2006 article that Morlion was moving away from the Luce-Jackson apparatus when he and Cousins teamed up over a possible Moscow mission, despite the fact that U.S. dollars were still flowing into his organisation.3 Yet if the CIA leaves the story, Catholicism does not. Pietrobon points to the fact that Cousins’s Moscow timetable was set by the Vatican and not the White House (or the Kremlin). Pope John XXIII had begun the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) on 11 October 1962 (less than a week before the Cuban Missile Crisis began) to re-assess Church doctrine and relations with the contemporary world. Cousins’s initial trip of December 1962 “to discuss Vatican business” (65) must have been to talk over the wider implications of Vatican II. Pope John XXIII had already stated his intention to move the Church in favour of socio-economic reform and redressing under-development, in doing so


3 Ibid., 32.
rejecting the competition of ‘false ideologies.’ It is understandable that the Kremlin might be a little apprehensive as to where this might go. The ensuing meeting with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev involved three hours of “Vatican matters” (65) before a moment arose when Cousins introduced President John F. Kennedy’s overture to improve US-Soviet relations.

The initial setting for this successful act of citizen diplomacy was therefore provided by Vatican interests. After this first meeting, Cousins followed up with meetings with Kennedy advisor Ralph Dungan, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Kennedy himself, and was able to arrange a second meeting with Khrushchev in April 1963. These discussions seem to indicate that by this stage the LTBT was the main issue driving the contact, ‘Vatican matters’ having now faded into the background. Cousins had by this stage established enough credibility as an intermediary that he was chosen in place of Attorney General Robert Kennedy to pursue the contact with Moscow one step further. From this point on, Pietrobon rightly emphasizes that Cousins had a significant impact, not simply through his one-on-one talks with both Kennedy and Khrushchev, but also with his pivotal role in prompting and then largely drafting President Kennedy’s American University speech of 10 June 1963, which satisfied the Soviet leader that his country was being seen as an equal. He followed this up with a successful public relations campaign to overcome skepticism in Congress and secure the Treaty’s passage in September.

Pietrobon’s article is a welcome venture into what has become termed New Diplomatic History – the broadening of research into the diplomatic landscape to re-assess ‘the diplomat’ and include other actors and settings that permeate the inter-state script but are often marginalized by traditional approaches. The boundaries of what constitutes diplomatic history are from this perspective less clear-cut. The author admirably maintains a careful balance between pointing out Cousins’s own influence in the LTBT process, while at the same time acknowledging that he was only part of a much larger development stretching over several years. Nevertheless, the Cousins-LTBT episode does indicate that even matters of high politics sometimes require unconventional methods to achieve a breakthrough.

Finally, to return to the claim that Cousins represents the first and most successful use of a citizen diplomat during the Cold War, while there is plenty of evidence in favour of this hypothesis, some caveats are in order. Firstly, the claim is clearly rather U.S.-centric. The scene-setting role of the Vatican has already been mentioned, and looking beyond the U.S., names such as European integration maestro Jean Monnet also come to mind. Second, and following from this, the analysis here is based on Cousins’s ‘use’ for Track Two diplomacy. In other words, if Cousins had not been acting in the service of the U.S. government, the ‘citizen diplomat’ tag would disappear. Could someone be citizen diplomat if he did not represent a state? After all, during Cousins’s first visit to Khrushchev, he was apparently a private emissary of the Pope, and not a diplomatic representative of the Holy See. This represents the real challenge: blending social history with diplomatic history such that the ‘diplomatic’ is broadened out but still discernable. While this article does stay within the bounds of a general understanding of the diplomatic, it is a valuable move in that direction.

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