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Diplomacy is Hard Work: We Could Use Some of it Right Now



[Source: belfercenter.org]

I've been doing a lot of research lately for a new book I'm writing that has nothing whatsoever to do with intelligence or the CIA, and I stumbled upon the biography of Frank Mankiewicz, the former Robert F. Kennedy speechwriter, who apparently had been a "secret backchannel" between President Gerald Ford and Cuban leader Fidel Castro in the mid-1970s.

Ford had his hands full cleaning up the mess that Richard Nixon had left him, and he wanted to try to improve U.S. relations with the Cubans.

In the event of failure, however, he didn't want anybody to know that he had tried. Mankiewicz went to Havana a number of times, failed to produce a breakthrough, and stopped going.



Frank Mankiewicz center, with Fidel Castro on right. Kirby Jones is on Mankiewicz' left.

[Source: nsarchive2.gwu.edu]

The story reminded me of two others, and it led me to consider—or perhaps to reconsider—the use of secret backchannels. They just don't work.

Just after I joined the CIA in 1990, I was sent to a week-long conference in Annapolis, Maryland. There were only 12 of us analysts there, and our “guest of honor” was General Vernon Walters.

Walters was a legend at the CIA. A retired four-star general, he was a former Deputy Director of the CIA, Ambassador to the United Nations, and Ambassador to Germany.

Walters was fluent in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. And he loved to tell people that once, when he provided simultaneous translation for a Nixon speech in France, French President Charles DeGaulle told the U.S. President, “You gave a magnificent speech, but your interpreter was eloquent.”



General Vernon Walters [Source: ocsalumni.org]

Walters had been a secret backchannel to Ho Chi Minh in the late 1960s, and he regaled us at that conference with stories of his negotiations with foreign leaders that had never made the press.

At dinner one night, I got up the courage to ask him a question. “General Walters,” I said. “Was there ever a time on one of these secret missions where you feared for your safety?” He answered quickly. “No,” then thought about it for a second. “Well,” he said, “maybe once.” I made a very secret trip to Havana once to meet with Castro. Only Nixon knew I was there. He hadn’t even told Kissinger. I thought, ‘Castro could kill me and nobody would know anything about it.’ Then I looked at him across the table and I thought, ‘I could take this scrawny son-of-a-bitch.’”

In the end, Castro was perfectly hospitable. But whatever message Walters delivered to him didn’t change the poor state of U.S. relations with Cuba.

In the mid-1990s, I was assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain, where I worked as an economic officer.

There was a group in the capital Manama called the Bahrain-U.S. Banking Society. It was made up of, as you might imagine, U.S. and Bahraini bankers who would get together for dinner once a month and host speakers.

One day in 1995, they announced that they were giving a “lifetime achievement award” to famed banker David Rockefeller.



David Rockefeller [Source: [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com)]

A month later, Rockefeller flew to Bahrain and the Amir, the country's leader, hosted a major dinner for him. Everybody who was anybody was invited, including the entire cabinet, the diplomatic corps, and every major businessman in the country. There was a long receiving line, and when it was finally my turn to introduce myself to Mr. Rockefeller, I congratulated him on another award that he had recently received from an art group in New York. Our interaction lasted less than 10 seconds.

A few days later, my Ambassador asked if I had enjoyed the dinner. I said it was great, but I didn't understand why somebody as important as David Rockefeller would fly halfway around the world to collect an award from a banking group that nobody ever heard of.

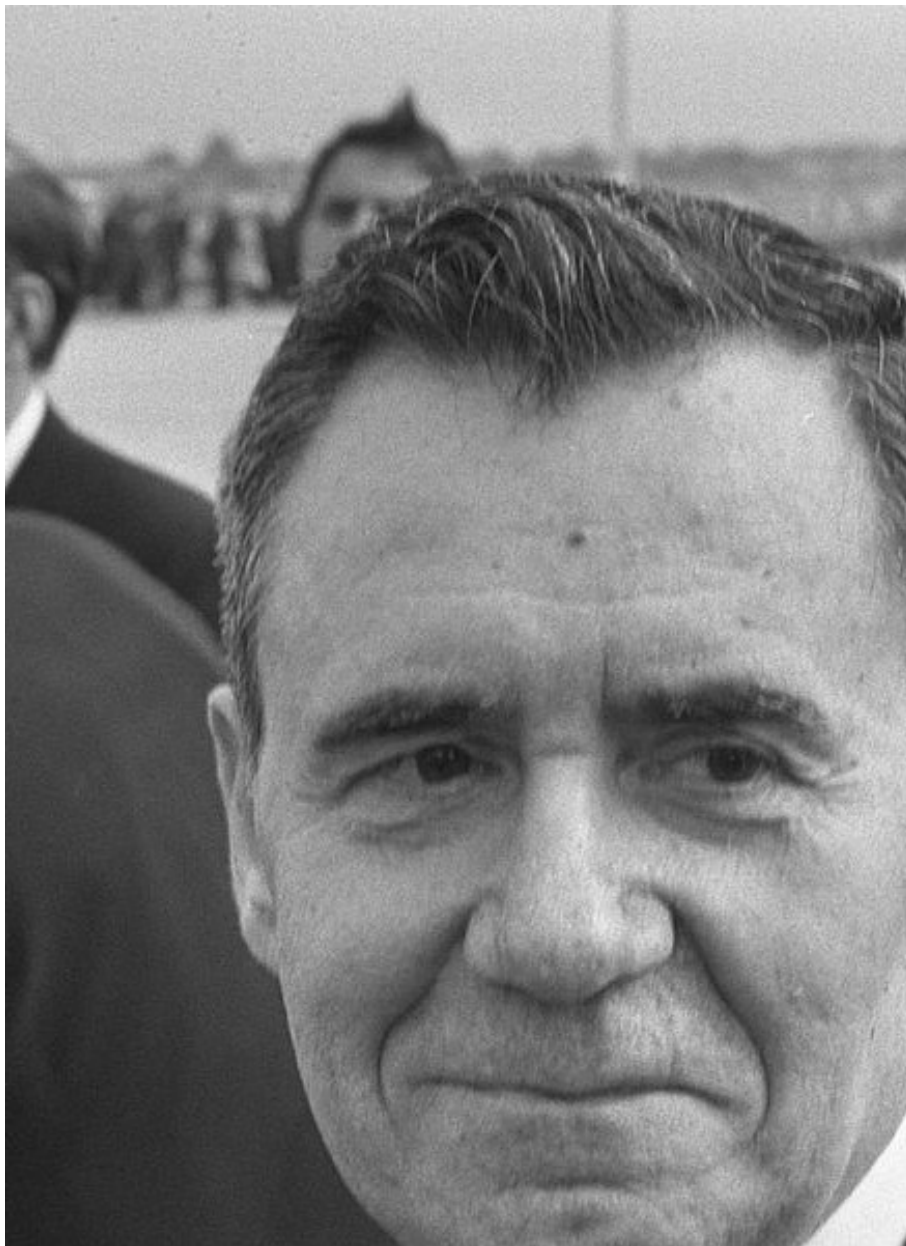
The Ambassador slapped his forehead. "John, John, John. You're supposed to be the smart one," he said. "David Rockefeller doesn't care about the award. He's the secret backchannel to Saddam Hussein. Collecting the award was just a cover stop for him."

I couldn't believe that I hadn't seen it. I learned later that Rockefeller had indeed met with Saddam Hussein, he passed a message from Bill Clinton that Saddam absolutely, positively had to give up his weapons of mass destruction, and he went home. It was another failure—not because Rockefeller had done a bad job, so much as because Saddam didn't have any weapons of mass destruction.

Over the course of my 15 years at the CIA, I heard myriad stories about secret encounters between Americans acting on behalf of this or that President and representatives of leaders around the world that we just didn't get along with.

The bottom line was that these "secret" backchannels, "chance encounters," and clandestine get-togethers simply don't work. There's no substitute for open, ongoing diplomacy.

I was reminded recently of something that Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko once said. "I prefer 10 years of negotiations to one day of war."



Andrei Gromyko [Source: [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Gromyko)]

He was right. Diplomacy is hard work. It can't be done with a handful of secret meetings. No matter what the issue, no matter what countries are involved, no matter how difficult "the other side" might be, diplomacy is the only legitimate response to the world's problem. We could use some of it right now.

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John Kiriakou

John Kiriakou was a CIA analyst and case officer from 1990 to 2004.

In December 2007, John was the first U.S. government official to confirm that waterboarding was used to interrogate al-Qaeda prisoners, a practice he described as torture.

Kiriakou was a former senior investigator for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a former counter-terrorism consultant. While employed with the CIA, he was involved in critical counter-terrorism missions following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but refused to be trained in so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques," nor did he ever authorize or engage in such crimes.

After leaving the CIA, Kiriakou appeared on ABC News in an interview with Brian Ross, during which he became the first former CIA officer to confirm the existence of the CIA's torture program. Kiriakou's interview revealed that this practice was not just the result of a few rogue agents, but was official U.S. policy approved at the highest levels of the government.

Kiriakou is the sole CIA agent to go to jail in connection with the U.S. torture program, despite the fact that he never tortured anyone. Rather, he blew the whistle on this horrific wrongdoing.