

What Signals from Oslo?



mitments to outweigh his own perception of his nation's key strategic interests and the best ways to achieve them, is plainly farcical. If President Obama eventually comes to the conclusion that the best way forward in Afghanistan consists in giving Gen. McChrystal all the extra troops he

The most interesting and bizarre aspects of the Nobel Committee's decision to award President Barack Obama the 2009 Peace Prize are not to be found in the decision itself, surprising and perplexing as it is, but rather in the extreme variety of commentaries being formulated in an attempt to try and make some sense out of the whole affair.

Everybody but everybody – apparently even including Barak Obama himself, who spoke about being “surprised and deeply humbled” by the award – feel that the President's actions over the nine months since his January inauguration do not possibly justify such a prestigious accolade, which indeed is palpably true. Even the Committee's official announcement makes ample references to the President's (assumed) intentions and declarations on a number of issues, but it is necessarily quite short on facts. Given this, speculations are rife about the ulterior motives that conditioned the decision by the Committee (whose members, it should be recalled, are drawn from the Norwegian parliament, and thus are politicians by their trade and apt to think and act in political terms). Such speculations, however, seem to mostly reflect the ideas, hopes and expectations of those who formulate them, rather than providing a credible analysis of an utterly astonishing move.

The most simplistic explanation is that the Committee basically fell blindly in love with the rhetoric that heavily conditioned Barak Obama's electoral campaign and still play a preeminent role in his presidency, and thus mistook vague promises, smiles and a lot of nice words for the real engagement of a statesman committed towards achieving world peace. But even apart from the highly disputable underlying picture of the Nobel Committees members as a solid bunch of fools, this hypothesis was promptly contradicted by statements by the Committee's Chairman himself, Mr Thorbjorn Jagland who in an interview with the “New York Times” spoke about a perceived need of “going into the realm of *realpolitik*”.

Most tentative analyses are thus focused precisely on *realpolitik*, i.e. the Committee having awarded the Nobel Prize to President Obama not because its members felt he had merited it, but rather in order to send a powerful political message around, or/and to try and sort of hopefully influencing or conditioning the President's future actions towards a certain desired direction.

Indeed, the Nobel Committee has a solid record of having already used (or misused if you wish) the Peace Prize award as a political tool in the recent past, particularly as regards important US politicians. There is little doubt that the award to ex-President Jimmy Carter in 2002 was basically intended to signal disapproval for the impending invasion of Iraq, and by the same token the choice of defeated presidential candidate Al Gore in 2007 was quite a powerful indication to the effect that the world had enough of George W. Bush and his policies. Given this, the main question is of what exactly the Nobel Committee is up to this time, plus the secondary question of whether or not it is likely to succeed in its aims.

An optimistic assessment is for the Committee having moved to cast sort of a “moral spell” onto President Obama, under the form of a yet unjustified recognition in advance that would hopefully bind him towards trying and meriting it post-facto through his future actions. This would involve to start with the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the momentous decisions President Obama would need to take in the immediate future as regards their prosecution, plus the renewed threats of a possible “military option” against Iran as well as in a more distant future the chimera of total nuclear disarmament.

But although one would really *love* to subscribe to such a rosy analysis, the notion of a US President – any US President, or indeed any self-respecting politician in any country – being prepared to accept for his actions to be conditioned by dubious moral commitments artificially imposed upon him by a foreign body, and for such com-

wants, he will give the relevant order without a second of thought about whether or not such is in line with the letter and spirit of his Nobel Prize. Ditto about completing withdrawal from Iraq, about bombing Iran, or indeed about any other conceivable future occasion whereby the use of military force, right or wrong, would be perceived by the Obama administration as the best solution to protect and advance US interests. If the Nobel Committee's members really think the Peace Prize gives them sort of a moral ascendancy and control over President Obama, then they are something even worse than a bunch of fools.

And then there is a more sombre tentative hypothesis. Some commentators speculate that the Nobel Committee might have acted, virtually on behalf of most if not all European governments, to signal approval for the foreign policy President Obama has been following so far – a policy that basically involves continued prosecution (including through war if necessary) of the very same goals as being sought after by the previous administration, however wrapped in a lot of smart talking and formulated in a multilateral context to replace George W. Bush's ill-advised unilateralism. Under this pessimistic vision, far from trying to restrain President Obama from further military adventurism the Peace Prize award is actually intended to give him sort of a “go ahead” as far as Europe is concerned.

If you think of it, Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, and the entire Nobel Prizes endeavour is financed through the returns of that invention. Sometimes one feels Mr Nobel would have made things much simpler, by instituting a Nobel Prize for War, rather than for Peace ...


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