

Obama's Prize Named For The Inventor of Dynamite

Will It Encourage Him To Become More "Transformational" Or Not?

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New York, New York: Does anyone among us remember Le Duc Tho? He was the brilliant Vietnamese negotiator at the Paris Peace talks who played Henry Kissinger for the fool he is. Back in 1974, on a reporting trip to Hanoi for a Boston radio station, I had the good fortune to interview him as one of that country's senior leaders and heroes.

At the time, he seemed more interested in finding out from me about the background to the busing crisis in South Boston, than in explaining the reasons that the United States would soon lose the Vietnam war.

A year earlier, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with Henry Kissinger. The egomaniacal Henry the K of course immediately accepted it. The far more principled Le Duc Tho did not, believing that the victims of massive US bombing, ordered in part by Kissinger, should not be put on an equal status with the aggressor.

He also knew that Alfred Nobel had been an inventor of dynamite, and that his peace efforts followed his invention leaving many places in pieces.

Of course the prize has gone to many impressive leaders, but often in a compromised way. Nelson Mandela accepted his alongside De Klerk, the man who had been his jailer.

The award may be considered inspiring, even as an undeserved "call to action" as a "humbled" Barack Obama explained, noting he doesn't compare himself to earlier "transformational" figures. But, recall also, as we must, it is not given out by peers or the experts who decide the scientific awards but by retired politicians with no expertise in peace-making.

Alexander Cockburn can always be counted on to seek out the hidden history, writing,

"Woodrow Wilson, the liberal imperialist with whom Obama bears some marked affinities, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919, having brought America into the carnage of the First World War. The peace laureate president who preceded him was Teddy Roosevelt, who got the prize in 1906 as reward for sponsorship of the Spanish-American war and ardent bloodletting in the Philippines. Senator George Hoar's famous denunciation of Roosevelt on the floor of the US Senate in May of 1902 was probably what alerted the Nobel Committee to Roosevelt's eligibility for the Peace Prize:

"You have sacrificed nearly ten thousand American lives—the flower of our youth. You have devastated provinces. You have slain uncounted thousands of the people you desire to benefit. You have established reconcentration camps. Your generals are coming home from

their harvest bringing sheaves with them, in the shape of other thousands of sick and wounded and insane to drag out miserable lives, wrecked in body and mind. You make the American flag in the eyes of a numerous people the emblem of sacrilege in Christian churches, and of the burning of human dwellings, and of the horror of the water torture.”

Lest we forget, and many of us have, we live in a universe driven by symbolic gestures, not necessarily real achievement, by perceptions, not realities. The Nobel Prize seeks to encourage change as well as honor it. The people ridiculing Obama, who did not seek the award and seemed as surprised as everyone else when he got it, tend to think one dimensionally about it even though the media role in all this may have had more to do with it than we realize.

Robert Naiman notes that the Nobel people are as interested in influencing events as in praising a president, “That’s what the Nobel Committee is trying to do for Obama now. It’s giving an award to encourage the change in world relations that Obama has promised, and to try to help shield Obama against his domestic adversaries. The committee is well aware that history is contingent and that Obama might fail. It knows very well that the same country that elected Obama also gave the world George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan.” Bishop Tutu got his prize in 1984 as an effort to encourage the fall of apartheid years before it fell.

That said, what Americans don’t realize is that role the media played in this because of the differences between what people in other countries see and what we don’t.

The Media monitoring organization Media Tenor explains: “ “Obama’s greatest strength in foreign media, is exactly the same strength which led the Nobel Prize committee to its decision – foreign affairs. In Middle Eastern, African and Western European media markets Obama’s image is driven by between 40-65% of all volume on issues relating to foreign policy with correspondingly high ratings for the president in those media markets, “Yet Obama’s image has developed a significant downside – his own domestic media market. In US TV news, Obama suffers a negative balanced rating for the year 2009. The failure of his healthcare reforms, the inevitable backlash on the administration over high unemployment and the ongoing financial instability in the wake of the financial crisis have given the US media plenty of ammunition against the President. In the US where Obama’s overall media rating is a round 25% negative – he also rates negatively on foreign affairs.”

So, thus, an award given by pols in Norway reflect their impressions, not necessarily ours. The American reaction was of course myopic and provincial, mired in polarized politics and a twitterized culture of jaded skepticism where personalities drive the news

What should Obama have done? Turn it down and risk putting down world opinion and those who want to recognize some of his initiatives? He knows he is never going to please those who put him down, on the left as a war monger, or on the right as a, take your pick, suicide bomber, commie, fascist, Muslim fanatic etc.

Should he have accepted it in escrow with a panel of analysts to be named later to decide whether his accomplishments at term’s end make him more worthy as a winner than loser?

Clearly, those who already hate him and think he can, and will, do no good have something new to snicker and feel self-righteous about. Those who think he walks on water have more validation as members of his uncritical fan club.

Everyone else is astonished that he won THE big prize for moving his mouth, not the world itself. This latest accolade may just add to his burdens.

And where does it leave us? Exactly where we were before with a President stymied by excessive caution, backed by an unmobilized constituency of well-wishers, pressured on all sides by Pentagon and Wall Street power, along with a media that tilts right and ignores world opinion,

Denunciations do not work. Why not try organizing? As we used to sing in the civil rights movement, keep your eyes on the prize. Not the Nobel Prize.

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