

Obama's Rejection Speech

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That was not a peace prize acceptance speech. That was an infomercial for war. President Obama took the peace prize home with him, but left behind in Oslo his praise for war, his claims for war, and his view of an alternative and more peaceful approach to the world consisting of murderous economic sanctions.

Some highlights:

“There are the men and women around the world who have been jailed and beaten in the pursuit of justice; those who toil in humanitarian organizations to relieve suffering; the unrecognized millions whose quiet acts of courage and compassion inspire even the most hardened of cynics. I cannot argue with those who find these men and women — some known, some obscure to all but those they help — to be far more deserving of this honor than I.”

Yet, you did argue. You argued by accepting the prize ... and then making a false case for war:

“War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man. At the dawn of history, its morality was not questioned; it was simply a fact, like drought or disease — the manner in which tribes and then civilizations sought power and settled their differences.”

This is simply not true of all tribes and civilizations, unless we include war making as a criterion for being considered civilized.

“The concept of a ‘just war’ emerged, suggesting that war is justified only when it meets certain preconditions: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the forced used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence.”

How dare someone responsible for illegal occupations and air strikes and the use of unmanned drones say these words? (Responsible, that is, given the failure of Congress and of we the people to stop him.)

“America led the world in constructing an architecture to keep the peace: a Marshall Plan and a United Nations, mechanisms to govern the waging of war, treaties to protect human rights, prevent genocide and restrict the most dangerous weapons.”

How dare a president refusing to support a treaty on land mines speak in these terms? Are we supposed to not see the actions and just hear the words?

“I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King said in this same ceremony years ago: ‘Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: It merely creates

new and more complicated ones.”

Very wise. Very true. And completely violated by Barack Obama’s actions and the better part of the words in this speech. Are we supposed to hear these words in a different part of our brains from the rest of the speech and its advocacy of war?

“A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaidas leaders to lay down their arms.”

Now a group of fewer than 100 angry people in Afghanistan, and their allies elsewhere, are the rough equivalent of “Hitler’s armies” and justify the brutal occupation of a nation by tens and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and mercenaries, tanks and planes, and unmanned drones? And negotiations, with the Taliban or anyone else, are not possible because ... because ... well, because of that rhetoric about Hitler’s armies.

“The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans. We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest.”

A 1993 Congressional Research Service (CRS) study of the U.S. Navy’s Naval Historical Center records identified “234 instances in which the United States has used its armed forces abroad in situations of conflict or potential conflict or for other than normal peacetime purposes” between 1798 and 1993. This list does not include covert actions or post-World War II occupation forces and base agreements. In a 2006 review of this study and two others, Gar Smith found that “in our country’s 230 years of existence, there have been only 31 years in which U.S. troops were not actively engaged in significant armed adventures on foreign shores.” In other words, fewer than 14% of America’s days have been at peace. As of 2006, there were 192 member states in the United Nations. Over the past two centuries, the United State has attacked, invaded, policed, overthrown, or occupied 62 of them. (<http://www.afterdowningstreet.org/militarism>)

“I believe that all nations — strong and weak alike — must adhere to standards that govern the use of force. I — like any head of state — reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation.”

The United Nations Charter, to which the United States is party, and which is therefore the supreme law of the United States under Article VI of the Constitution is apparently not a standard that governs the use of force, since President Obama has just thrown it away in a statement of Obama Doctrine that appears indistinguishable from the so-called Bush doctrine. Obama then doubles down with a Bush the Elder / Clintonian doctrine of humanitarian war:

“I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That is why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace.”

Obama equates non-military action, non-hostile action, with inaction, pure and simple.

Where is aid? Where is diplomacy? Where is cooperation? Why are all non-hostile approaches to other nations banished from the text of a Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech a mere 25 years after 1984?

“Peace entails sacrifice. That is why NATO continues to be indispensable.”

What can be said to render that statement less persuasive than it is on its own? Maybe this:

“That is why I prohibited torture. That is why I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed. And that is why I have reaffirmed America’s commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions.”

Torture was illegal internationally and in the US code of law before Obama became president. He publicly instructed the Attorney General of the United States not to enforce those laws. He claimed the power to “rendition” people to other nations where they might be tortured. His CIA Director and a top presidential advisor have claimed the president has the power to torture if he chooses to. And President Obama has here claimed the power to prohibit or un-prohibit torture, spitting in the face of the very idea of the rule of law. The prison at Guantanamo is not closed, and moving those prisoners to Illinois or Bagram or any other lawless U.S. prison will not bring the United States into compliance with the Geneva Conventions.

“I have spoken to the questions that must weigh on our minds and our hearts as we choose to wage war. But let me turn now to our effort to avoid such tragic choices, and speak of three ways that we can build a just and lasting peace.”

At last, mid-speech, we are presented with a drop of that toxic trademarked substance: hope. Only to swallow a mouthful of this:

“First, in dealing with those nations that break rules and laws, I believe that we must develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to change behavior — for if we want a lasting peace, then the words of the international community must mean something. Those regimes that break the rules must be held accountable. Sanctions must exact a real price. Intransigence must be met with increased pressure — and such pressure exists only when the world stands together as one.”

Set aside the hypocrisy of the globalism and rule-of-law talk from a commander in chief escalating wars and occupying 177 nations around the world. The message here is that a decent alternative to war is crippling sanctions that “exact a real price.” The wisdom of a creative nonviolent outlook has not yet penetrated. And the President does not develop the idea any further, turning instead to nuclear arms:

“...those with nuclear weapons will work toward disarmament. I am committed to upholding this treaty. It is a centerpiece of my foreign policy. And I am working with President Medvedev to reduce America and Russia’s nuclear stockpiles. But it is also incumbent upon all of us to insist that nations like Iran and North Korea do not game the system. Those who claim to respect international law cannot avert their eyes when those laws are flouted.”

The United States is not seriously pursuing disarmament, is developing new nuclear weapons, is in clear violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And Iran is not.

“America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are

governments that protect the rights of their citizens.”

President Obama, in his famous Middle-East speech earlier this year admirably acknowledged the U.S. overthrow of a democratically elected president in Iran, and the installation of a dictator — who, like many dictators then and now, was one of our closest friends. The greatest success of international law in recent years has been the precedent set by prosecutors seeking to hold responsible Augusto Pinochet. Does anyone recall how he came into power?

“So even as we respect the unique culture and traditions of different countries, America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal.”

Indeed.

“Let me also say this: The promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone. At times, it must be coupled with painstaking diplomacy. I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach — and condemnation without discussion — can carry forward a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.”

And there, as this reprehensible speech is dragging to a close, are the words with which it should have begun, the words denied by the thrust of everything else here and by the actions of the man delivering the words. And then there was a bit more:

“[A] just peace includes not only civil and political rights — it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.”

A bitter statement for the people of Afghanistan or the United States to hear from a president who has acted to divert our resources upward to Wall Street and downwards into bombs and bases. But true and worth repeating nonetheless.

Let’s not imagine, however, that George W. Bush would not have said the same. He would simply have said it with a smaller military budget, a smaller war budget, fewer troops in the field, fewer mercenaries in the field, bases in fewer countries, and worse grammar.

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