

Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech – an exercise in American triumphalism

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Cry havoc, let loose the dogs of war, and win the Nobel Peace Prize - that should be the motto of the Norwegian Noble Committee. The Committee's Chairman, Thorbjorn Jagland, has said that for 108 years the Committee had sought to stimulate precisely the international policy and attitudes for which Barack Obama is now the world's leading spokesman. A strange choice considering the fact that out of all the other candidates, the Committee picked the Commander-in-Chief of a nation that is leading two of the hottest wars of this century. Speculation over potential winners had focused on Zimbabwe's Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai, a Colombian senator and a Chinese dissident, along with an Afghan women's rights activist.

As if the choice of the winner had not been surprising enough, President Obama accepted the Nobel for peacemaking by delivering, in his usual eloquent style, a grim treatise on the nature and necessity of warfare. Standing on the podium at the Oslo City Hall, he defended the idea that some wars were necessary and just, and reminded the world of the burden the United States had borne in the fight against oppression: "We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations - acting individually or in concert - will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified."

According to Alfred Nobel's will, the Peace Prize should be awarded to the person who "**during the preceding year [...] shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congress.**" [Excerpt from the Will of Alfred Nobel, Nobel Foundation.]

The criteria hardly fits President Barack Obama with barely a year in the office, no foreign policy or domestic success stories, unless one counts some of his eloquent speeches, and who landed in Oslo just having sanctioned after a considerable deliberation with his 'peace congress', a military surge to the war in Afghanistan and attacks on Pakistan.

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A cartoon carried by *The News International* on December 12, 2009, conveyed more than any amount of critical intellectualization would ever do on President Obama's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Oslo - The frame showed President Obama rushing off a tank marked with the sign 'Afghan Surge' to get his peace prize and asking the tank commander to keep the motor running.

While a picture is worth a thousand words, the transcript of President Obama's speech is no less illuminating of the 'war president' that many of his predecessors, particularly the last one, would have been proud of. Consider the following excerpts:

"I'm responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill, and some will be killed ... We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes ... Evil does exist in the world ... It will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace ... I reserve the right to act unilaterally ... force can be justified on humanitarian grounds"

In the context of his last quote, he particularly mentioned failed States as Somalia, and the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea. President Obama reminded his audience that it was America which has led the world after the two World Wars "in constructing an architecture to keep the peace", and acting in "enlightened self-interest" to prevent a Third World War. His basic conclusion is that war is always tragic but sometimes necessary: "Negotiations cannot convince Al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms."

In the course of history, world leaders with military ambitions have used the legalist paradigm of aggression to differentiate between the just and unjust wars, a paradigm that is strikingly obvious in Obama's speech to justify why America must wage wars for peace "as the world's sole military superpower." Even as he offered a defence for his award, he conveniently forgot that wars do not make peace; they only destroy it.

Ramzi Kysia, an Arab-American essayist and an organizer with the Free Gaza Movement, writing for the Online Journal on December 14, 2009, contends that "peace and liberty are expressions of our relationships with one another, and as such they cannot be created by anything other than the connections within and between human communities. They cannot be birthed through war."

President Obama certainly does not subscribe to this argument and contended in his speech that as a head of State sworn to protect and defend America, he cannot be guided by the examples of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. It seems that he does not want to even admit the fact that America's 'justified' violence can be as immoral as that of Al Qaeda. The non-violence practiced by Gandhi and King, according to Obama may not be practical or possible in every circumstance. The goal for Obama is clear - it is the advancement of American interest rather than that of humanity that he speaks so eloquently of.

President Obama may be a just and morally upright man, but that does not change the fact that American bombing of cities and villages in Iraq and Afghanistan in a 'necessary war' has directly and indirectly denied human beings access to food, clean water, medicine, shelter, education, and jobs, as well as causing or contributing to deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in 'collateral damage'. Keeping this in mind, one may as well argue that in view of America's 'justified violence', the Afghan and the Iraqi insurgencies too can be termed as 'morally justified' wars against a giant, oppressive, military superpower by the only means they have available, and hence cannot be termed as 'terrorists' that Obama wants to eliminate through his 'just war'.

It is only natural for Obama to assume that the Afghans, the Pakistanis, the Iraqis and the Palestinians, simply because of their persistence in opposing the American value system, are not just acting badly, or influenced by evil, but *are* 'Evil' itself. Their blood therefore does not matter; what does matter for Obama standing at the peace award podium, is the blood of the American citizens that for the last more than six decades has helped underwrite global security.

One fails to find any new course for peace that President Obama can be expected to take in future other than harking back to the use of the 'muscular moralism' that many of his predecessors found so convenient to apply in dealing with issues relating to foreign policy. For all the talk of 'change' that had preceded President Obama's tenure at the White House, 'Walk softly and carry a big stick' will still be the underling principle of his approach in dealing with nations that may not agree with the American notions of peace.

However, in spite of all the emphasis on war talk, President Obama did in conclusion make a passing mention to three ways for building a 'just and lasting peace' which seemed essential perhaps to justify his award:

1. Develop alternatives to violence in dealing with nations that break rules and laws.
2. Seek a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual.
3. Economic security and opportunity.

All the three ingredients for peace have in one way or the other, invariably found way in many of the speeches by his predecessors, particularly Truman and Reagan who never tired of professing the dignity of man and the strengthen of the American values.

For all its rhetorical thoughtfulness and reasoning, Obama's speech, rather than being a recipe for a tryst with peace, was an exercise in jingoism, a paeon to American triumphalism that all humanity must subscribe to and "that is the hope of all the world."