

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

DEVALUING THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Most intellectually honest people have already concluded that awarding Barack Obama the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize has devalued the prize itself. A President who has served only nine months and has accomplished virtually nothing in terms of international peace does not deserve such an honor. That he received this honor says more about Europe and the Oslo committee than it does about President Obama. As far as I know, he did not seek this nor did he expect it. Why did the Nobel Committee do this? What does it mean? Has the Prize now lost its significance? A few thoughts.

- First of all, some history. Obama is only the third sitting President to receive the Prize, the others being Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson received the Prize in December 1920 at the end of his presidency. He had brought the US through the First World War, and negotiated the Treaty of Versailles, especially the section that called for the establishment of the League of Nations. The Nobel Committee desired to honor this president who had given so much for world peace. It was a tragic end for Wilson, for he was sick, having suffered a debilitating stroke while trying to get the Senate to ratify the Versailles Treaty. Because of the isolationism of the US Senate, the Treaty was never ratified by the US. Isolationists were fearful of this new international body called the League of Nations. Because he was so sick he was not able to go to Kristiana (as Oslo was called then), to accept the award and deliver the expected address. But the award was a boost to Wilson, who by this time was not only physically sick, but his approval ratings in the US were low and he was demoralized. It was a generous act of grace on the part of the Nobel Committee. In contrast to Wilson, Obama is receiving this award in the early months of his presidency; he has accomplished nothing and is being recognized for his goals, not his achievements. The Committee declared, as it made the announcement, that "Obama has as president created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role the United Nations and other international institutions can play." The Committee apparently believes that Obama's pro-UN position deserves recognition. Presumably, awarding President Obama the Prize is as much a jab at and criticism of former President Bush as anything else. In doing so, the Committee is engaging in raw politics and that devalues the significance of the Prize.
- Second, former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw argues that President Obama should take with him to Oslo to receive the Prize a large delegation comprised of Americans who really deserve the Prize. He suggests former president George H.W. Bush, who managed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. Or former President Bill Clinton and

Richard Holbrooke, who both managed the Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the slaughter in Bosnia in the 1990s. His point: These people deserve the Prize. They should be recognized by Obama when he receives his undeserved Prize. Columnist Michael Gerson writes most perceptively that “Others, however, embraced the award in a more sophisticated manner—not as a tribute to Obama but as a symbol of America’s revived popularity in the world. It is a good thing, the argument goes, for an American president to be loved by foreigners, even if their sloppy display of affection is embarrassing.” Gerson goes on to argue that presidential popularity in the world is hardly a criterion for such an award. Has it or will it translate into effective diplomacy? We of course have no idea. But Gerson contends that there are at least three criteria that should be used to evaluate national standing: Credibility, reputation and personal popularity. On all three criteria, one must be suspect about President Obama at this early point in his presidency. His award was made not on the basis of his use of hard power (military prowess and/or the effective use of military power), or soft power (hard-headed diplomacy short of military action). His award was based on “Star power” and that seems to only matter in Oslo.

- Third, columnist Daniel Henninger offers a penetrating commentary on the symbolism of Oslo’s awarding this Prize to our president. He sees this award as proof of the state of political decadence so pervasive in much of Western Europe. This “Old Europe now lives in a world of unpayable public pension obligations, weak job creation for its youngest workers, below-replacement birth rates, fat agricultural subsidies for farms dating to the Middle Ages, high taxes to pay for the public high-life, and history’s most crucial proof of decay—the inability to finance one’s armies. Only five of the 28 nations in NATO (the UK, France Turkey, Greece and Spain) achieve the minimum defense-spending benchmark of 2% of GDP.” This Old Europe has embraced a “soft moralism” that refuses to come to terms with hard questions facing the West. Such hard questions involve Pakistan, Afghanistan, Darfur, and where to hold captured terrorists. Old Europe has been overcome by a soft, moralistic pacifism. That is why Oslo awarded Obama this Prize. They affirm his “vision of . . . a world without nuclear weapons” and “for meeting the great climactic challenges the world is confronting.” As Henninger so thoughtfully suggests, “Obama’s worldview coincides with that of the continent that claims to have seen itself in him and its Peace Prize.” But his Peace Prize has little to do with the hard decisions Obama needs to make about Afghanistan and the war on terror. Or Iran’s clear determination to build nuclear weapons. He must make his decisions based on the hard facts of reality, not the ephemeral dreams of soft moralism. The latent pacifism of the old Europe will help little in facing the brutal facts of a hostile, terror-filled world. The Nobel Prize that Obama will receive on 10 December is filled with the symbolism of a decadent civilization totally out of touch with reality. It is for that reason that our President, if he accepts the award, which he apparently is going to do, must accept it as the representative of a people totally on a different path than that of pacifistic Europe. The columnist Tom Friedman suggests that Obama accept the award as a president who “will never hesitate to call on American soldiers where necessary to take the field against the enemies of peace, tolerance and liberty—I accept this peace prize on behalf of the men and women of the US military: the world’s most important peace keeper.” That kind of language would at least indicate clearly that the US is not the Old Europe. The US still stands for something besides decadence.

See Tom Friedman in the *New York Times* (11 October 2009); Daniel Henninger in the *Wall Street Journal* (15 October 2009); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (14 October 2009); John Milton Cooper in the *New York Times* (11 October 2009); Tom Brokaw in the *Washington Post* (15 October 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

MUNICH, APPEASEMENT AND IRAN

As I am writing this *Perspective*, the US and key members of the European Community are meeting with Iran, trying to coax Iran into stopping its nuclear weapons program. In one way or another, the US has been negotiating with Iran since 1979—to no avail. Our new president believes that “engaging” Iran in negotiations can result in them abandoning their goals. It is highly unlikely that negotiating with Iran will produce this desired result. But this process raises an important question: Is the West about to embrace a policy of appeasement with Iran? The history of 1938 might offer the West some guidelines. Historian David Faber has written a new book entitled, *Munich, 1938: Appeasement and World War II*. I do not mean to suggest that there is a perfect parallel between Hitler and Iran today. But there are some important suggestions and transcultural principles to examine. In an attempt to preserve his policy of peace at any price, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain forced his Cabinet in the summer of 1938 to abandon any military threat or warning to Hitler’s Germany. This stance was taken despite all the evidence to that contrary: Nazi Party operatives were stirring up violence in the Sudetenland, the ethnically German area of Czechoslovakia. Hitler was rearming Germany and had already annexed the Rhineland, united with Austria and had declared in *Mein Kampf* his clear war aims. Chamberlain’s policy was to avoid war at any cost. As Joseph Loconte has written, “Thus Europe’s tortuous descent into a policy of appeasement was complete: a diplomatic delusion that triumphantly delivered Czechoslovakia into Nazi hands, setting the stage for Hitler’s lightning assault on Europe.” When Chamberlain signed the agreement in Munich, delivering Czechoslovakia into the hands of the Nazis, there was near euphoria in Britain. The *Times* wrote: “No conqueror returning from a victory on the battlefield has come home adorned with nobler laurels than Mr. Chamberlain from Munich yesterday.” What was happening in Britain is indicative of the pacifistic sentiment infecting all of Western Europe today. Faber’s magnificent book details the dissolution of the moral and political will of all of Western Europe, not just Britain.

Listen to Joe Loconte and see if you do not hear a faint echo of the same reality facing us in 2009: “The transcendent tragedy of Munich is that it might all have been averted. The Czech frontier defenses were considerable, but once the country’s borders were redrawn they were taken over by the Germans. The French Army, with a promise of help from Great Britain, might have held off the German advance. Hitler’s generals, in fact, feared this outcome. Thus, when Roosevelt asked Churchill what the new conflict should be called, he replied immediately: “the unnecessary war.” So, we must ask in 2009, has the world learned anything from the 1938 “catalogue of surrenders” to tyranny and terror? The central lesson of Faber’s wonderful book is simple: “A political regime can become irretrievably wicked, and that accommodating such a regime only feeds its rapacious and murderous ambitions.” In the summer of 1938, Hitler told his generals: “Our enemies are still worms. I saw them at Munich.” Is this how Ahmadinejad

sees the West? Is Iran yet “an irretrievably wicked regime?” Are Iran’s President and his denial of the holocaust and his desire to wipe Israel off the map, an echo of another regime in the 1930s? I hope that President Obama does not desire to ever appease Iran. It is wicked and so far negotiations have not stopped the nuclear program of Iran one bit. Why does he believe he can stop it now?

See Faber’s book, *Munich, 1938: Appeasement and World War II* and Joseph Loconte’s review of it in *Books and Culture* (12 October 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

IS RUSSIA BECOMING LIKE CHINA?

China is trying an experiment: Permitting a degree of economic freedom and a degree of private ownership, while maintaining totalitarian control over the political dimensions of China. Normally what occurs is that as greater economic freedom is granted, a demand for more political freedom follows. China is not permitting much political freedom at all. The Party still controls much of what occurs within the nation of China.

There is growing evidence that Russia is about to emulate China’s approach of granting economic freedom but denying political freedom. For example, Vladimir Putin’s political party, United Russia, is convening a special meeting this month with senior Chinese Communist Party officials to hear firsthand how they wield power. What Putin apparently admires is how the Chinese use the one-party system to maintain the tight control over their massive country, while driving the huge economic growth of China. Were it not for Russia’s significant deposits of oil, natural gas and other resources, Russia would be poverty-stricken. Its economy is almost third world! China, on the other hand, excels at manufacturing products that the entire world seeks to buy.

Clifford Levy comments that Russia’s fascination with the Chinese Communist Party underscores “United Russia’s lack of a core philosophy. The party has functioned largely as an arm of Mr. Putin’s authority. . .” Today both China and Russia govern with a potent centralized authority, overseeing economies with a mix of private and state industries. But China is considerably ahead of Russia in terms of modernizing roads, airports, power plants and other infrastructure needs so necessary for a modern economy. However, politically Russia is far more open than China. There are different political parties and there are little or no restrictions on Internet use. But there is growing evidence that United Russia seeks to become the singular political party of Russia. Putin seems to be facing East again. He seems to be rejecting the notion that Russia can successfully embrace Western notions of democracy and governing. Russia apparently believes that the age old tension over the question, “is Russia facing East or West?”, is settled now—Russia seeks to mimic the East’s strong centralized power, not the West’s democratic institutions. That is not good news for the United States.

See Levy’s helpful essay in the *New York Times* (18 October 2009).