

The Nobel War Prize

Bill Van Auken
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Friday's announcement by the Nobel committee in Norway that Barack Obama had been chosen to receive its 2009 Peace Prize was met with expressions of astonishment around the globe.

Many questioned how Obama could be chosen after less than nine months in office, with no discernable achievements on any front. He was inaugurated just 11 days before the cut-off date for nominations for the prize.

More significant, however, is what Obama has done in office, which has nothing to do with peace.

Obama appeared in the Rose Garden in the mid-morning to deliver remarks that began with a declaration that he was "surprised and deeply humbled" to receive the Peace Prize. He then marched back into the White House to meet with his war council and discuss sending tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan and escalating the bombing in that country and across the border in Pakistan.

Using his statement to issue veiled threats against Iran, Obama went out of his way to declare himself the "commander-in-chief" and refer to the two wars and occupations over which he presides.

While the Nobel committee praised him for his "vision of a world free from nuclear arms," Obama commented that this goal "may not be completed in my lifetime." Given that in talks with Moscow his administration has demanded the right to keep a minimum of 1,500 nuclear warheads, he knows whereof he speaks.

"We have to confront the world as we know it," said Obama, making a clear distinction between his supposed "vision" and the reality of his administration's bellicose policies.

On the surface, awarding a peace prize to the US president is farcical. There are widespread warnings that the selection may well prove only an embarrassment for the Obama administration. How is it

possible to proclaim a "commander-in-chief" who is responsible for war crimes, such as bombing the civilian population of Afghanistan—one such attack having claimed the lives of over 100 men, women and children just last May—as the champion of peace?

Yet, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize has always been a dubious distinction. Its reputation has never really recovered from the decision to award it in 1973 to Henry Kissinger, who is today unable to leave the United States for fear of being arrested as a war criminal. His co-recipient, Le Duc Tho, the Vietnamese leader who negotiated the Paris peace agreement with Kissinger, refused to accept the award, pointing out that the accord had brought no peace to his country.

A few years later, Menachem Begin was chosen for the prize. The Nobel committee chose to ignore his long career as a terrorist and killer, honoring him for reaching the Camp David deal with Anwar Sadat of Egypt, his co-recipient.

Jimmy Carter, whose administration instigated a war in Afghanistan that claimed a million lives, was given the same award in 2002.

The committee cannot be accused of violating its own principles, such as they are. The founder of the prize, Alfred Nobel, was the inventor of dynamite. He would no doubt be intrigued by the Pentagon's efforts to speed up production of the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP), a 30,000-pound bomb designed to obliterate underground targets. The weapon is being readied for possible use against Iran.

Despite its praise for Obama's "vision" and for having "captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future," the Nobel committee did not choose Obama based on illusions in his campaign rhetoric.

The Nobel Peace Prize is, and always has been, a political award given with the aim of promoting definite policies.

The selection was made by a committee composed of five members of the Norwegian parliament drawn from the main parties, ranging from the far-right to the social democrats. Its decisions reflect positions prevailing within the European ruling elite as a whole.

Thorbjorn Jagland, the committee's chairman and a former Norwegian prime minister, defended the choice of Obama in an interview with the *New York Times* Friday, expressing the cynicism underlying the choice. "It's important for the committee to recognize people who are struggling and idealistic, but we cannot do that every year," he said. "We must from time to time go into the realm of realpolitik."

Realpolitik doubtless played the decisive role in the recent selection of two other prominent American politicians for the prize: Carter in 2002 and Al Gore in 2007. Carter was picked on the eve of the US war against Iraq in a rebuke to the belligerent unilateralism of the Bush administration. The prize went to Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2000, in advance of the 2008 election, a not-so-subtle hint that Europe wanted a break from the Bush administration.

While in those years the prize was employed as a critique of US foreign policy, this time it represents an endorsement. As Jagland put it, "We hope this can contribute a little bit to enhance what he is trying to do."

The glaring contradiction in giving the peace prize to Obama as he prepares to send more troops into Afghanistan is more apparent than real. The award is meant to legitimize Washington's escalation in Afghanistan, its attacks on Pakistan and its continued occupation of Iraq, giving them Europe's seal of approval as wars for peace.

It serves to undermine popular opposition within the United States and internationally to the wars being waged under the Obama administration, as well as to future ones still being planned.

The European powers support the war in Afghanistan, a position that is more frequently finding its expression in the press. The British daily *Independent*, for example, published an editorial Thursday declaring that it "in principle" supports the call for sending as many as 40,000 more US troops into the war.

Meanwhile, Germany, France and other countries have shifted their positions on Iran as well, backing Washington's campaign for tougher measures.

What ruling circles in Europe see in Obama is not a champion of peace, but rather a shift away from the unilateralism of the Bush administration and a willingness to factor European support into the pursuit of US imperialism's strategic aims.

No doubt, Europe's governments calculate that their backing of the US military interventions will translate into a stake in the exploitation of the energy reserves of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Moreover, in legitimizing these wars and promoting a return to multilateralism in US foreign policy, the European powers see a means to legitimize their own turn to militarism and to suppress opposition to war within their own populations.

Obama's Nobel prize, far from signaling hope that the world's greatest military power is turning toward peace, is itself an endorsement of war and serves as a warning that the intensifying crisis of world capitalism is creating the conditions for resurgent militarism and the threat of widening international conflicts.

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