

Oct 12 2009

Barack Obama's Nobel Prize: A Debate

LSE Ideas

Barack Obama's award of the Nobel Peace Prize, with nominations having closed just a month into his Presidential term, has raised eyebrows. Here a number of Contributors discuss the award. Why was it made, and is it deserved? What's the political thinking behind it? How will it affect Obama's ability to pursue his foreign policy objectives? What will be the reaction domestically?

Arne Westad – This is a Nobel for good intentions rather than for achievements. Since Obama had been in office for all of a week and a half when the deadline for nominations ran out (on 1 February), it is obviously the promise of Obama that is being rewarded. In this sense it is probably first and foremost intended as a prize to the Americans for having had the courage to elect him. But it is hard to claim that the prize is going to the one who has done most for the cause of peace over the past year.

Nick Kitchen – It's hard to see that this can be a Nobel Prize 'for' anything – whilst the committee can always make a decision after the end of nominations and do not have to draw solely from the official list of nominees, what exactly is Barack Obama supposed to have actually done to merit the award?

Nigel Ashton – This is the Nobel Prize for hope. You can't make a case that Obama has achieved anything yet in terms of ending the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq or Israel/Palestine. It's also the Nobel Prize for not being George Bush.

George Lawson – The Nobel Foundation has had its fair share of odd moments. In its time, it has nominated Stalin and Mussolini, ignored Churchill and Gandhi and given the peace prize to Henry Kissinger and Theodore Roosevelt, neither of whom can exactly be regarded as peaceniks. Awarding the prize to a president who, by his own admission, has barely even started to make an impact on the world stage is right up there amongst the committee's quirkiest decisions.

Danny Quah – I think the Global Financial Crisis and the trillions of dollars the international community committed to global rescue has thrown into disarray all semblance of calm, reasoned, longer-term thinking in anything but the hard sciences [in which I would include Physiology or Medicine] and, paradoxically, the higher, more abstract realms of thinking [Literature]. In between – Peace, Economics – everyone has been only grabbing at straws and even, perhaps with hindsight years from now, decisions that might eventually turn out to be wise will right now seem knee-jerk and unthinking.

Mick Cox – Am I the only one who thinks it may have been a very good idea to have awarded President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize? We can of course twitter on about it being too premature and all that. However, we do need to remind ourselves why he may have been considered fit for the peace prize. After all, in less than a year, Obama has talked seriously about nuclear disarmament, made a real effort to overcome the divide between the West and the Moslem world, done something to restore the peace process in the Middle East, kept open some line of communication to the Iranians when urged not to, got rid of a provocative Ballistic Missile system in Europe, tried to defrost the US relationship with Russia, moved quickly to maintain good relations with China, led enthusiastically on global warming, made evident his desire to seek some new deal with Cuba, and stressed the need for the United States to work with and through the UN. Indeed, in his speech to the UN he even defined security in ways that should have warmed the cockles of every cosmopolitan and world society heart. So what is so bizarre about the decision?

NK – Perhaps the fact that on each of these issues any 'progress' is at best encouraging first steps. Even on Guantanamo, the key 'peace'-related pledge of the campaign, is not closed yet, and the practice has proved more difficult than the good intentions.

NA – Probably the most bizarre element of the announcement was the emphasis placed on Obama's supposed quest to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This part of his agenda isn't even supposed to be achievable.

Charlotte Armah – When I first heard of the award – I was surprised. 'So soon?' I thought and then I smiled as I realised that I had tacitly accepted that he was a contender and was just quibbling over the timing. Even John Bolton's whinge is not that Obama was awarded the Prize, but that it seems to go to Democratic US presidents! So what exactly is the issue here? That

Obama was awarded the prize at all or that he has been awarded the prize so early into his presidency that he has not had time to achieve anything significantly concrete to deserve the award?

AW – Certainly within the United States, there is the danger of the Peace Prize being seen as Norway's way of rewarding liberal US leaders just for being liberal.

NK – The Right are going to have a field day: for the listeners of Limbaugh the only thing worse than a liberal is a liberal who's feted by Europeans.

GL – But you can see where the decision is coming from. It has hardly been a vintage year for peace. The world is a mess and Obama, for many people, is its best hope. There is going to be little progress in the Middle East, Afghanistan or any other global hotspot without active engagement from the US government. And undeniably, the president and his advisers have been nothing if not active over the past few months. However, initiatives don't always yield outcomes and it is not yet clear whether Obama's presidency will succeed, or offer a 21st century rerun of the Carter administration, another occasion when a relatively inexperienced president scored high on hope, but low on delivery.

AW – It's certainly a sign of how oriented towards US affairs the Nobel Committee is. It's easier to encourage someone of promise and power than rewarding those who take risks for the cause of peace and human rights – say, Chinese dissidents or Iraqi critics of the occupation

DQ – The first thought I had when I saw the blogosphere reaction to the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate was, Thank goodness, this takes the heat off Economics – nothing that happens Monday will be worse than what's just happened with Peace. My second thought was, Well, actually, maybe not. I figure that this only rounds up a terrible year since September 2008. The various Nobel Committees here should have just called the whole thing off this year – stopped early for lunch and quietly gone home.

MC – There have certainly been odder – and less defensible – decisions made by the "Committee" in the past. What about Woodrow Wilson (who loved the Old South and opposed racial equality)? Menachem Begin (a terrorist in some people's opinion), Mother Tessa (who seemed to love other people's poverty while hating condoms)? And of course, dear Henry K. the man who gave so many green lights to so many horrible regimes and dictators in the Third World that one wonders why he was never arraigned for crimes against humanity.

DQ – I don't discount the reaction from the wired masses – even if I reserve the right to disagree with them. They are literate and numerous (the ones I read, anyway), and the integrated weight of their judgement is, after all, the coalface where both peace and social science scratch global reality. But I thought most telling in all the lamenting and complaining on Obama's being awarded the Prize, I have heard no strong well-defined, anywhere close to a majority, statement of the kind "It should have been X instead." The controversy surrounding Obama's being awarded the Prize is not that his actions have taken the world forwards in some people's eyes, and backwards in others. That we could live with, and indeed, it is that that has formed the controversy in all previous Laureates. In this case, however, the controversy, if you want to call it that, is that there has been yet either no action or no result. The difficulty is there was no one else the Nobel Committee could have turned to instead to award their Prize. In these circumstances, the Nobel Committee should have just shut down for the year.

NK – It's certainly an odd assumption to make that the world merits an annual award of this nature – the absence of standout candidates shouldn't mean we plump for potential.

CA – I'm not an academic or an IR expert so I can't debate whether there have been worthier winners or if someone more deserving was overlooked. I agree with Danny that it's very telling that the outcry is not 'It should have gone to fill in the blank.' I would point to the fact that there is almost no international issue in which the transformational impact of positive US engagement is not considered a critical success factor – whether it's Iran, Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, nuclear proliferation, the Middle East peace process, climate change, or the global economic and financial crises.

GL – In truth, awarding the prize to Obama is likely to have little substantive effect on the prospects for peaceful change around the world. Far more important will be what goes on beneath the surface of these global celebrity contests – in the nitty gritty of debates in Washington, Tehran, Moscow and elsewhere. But that is not really the point. The prize is a symbol, partly given it must be said, out of fear that things could get worse before they get better. Just as his failure to swing crucial IOC votes to Chicago's unsuccessful Olympic bid did not destroy – or even significantly dent – Obama's appeal abroad, the award of the Nobel Prize is likely to end up as a minor footnote on a busy presidency. Obama can afford to win – or lose – the world's beauty pageants. But there are other, much thornier, aspects of world politics where he cannot afford to fail.

MC – That's right: moreover, if we were to be real purists, then why fetishize the prize at all? Set up by a Swede who made a fortune from wars – perhaps we should be arguing against the prize in toto rather than against specific individuals who have won it. So let's not join the hue and cry. Lots of people have already attacked the decision including some sympathetic to Obama himself. But many have not – including a very large number of people with the least power and influence who, rightly or wrongly, see Obama not as an American but as a symbol of hope in a world where there isn't much of that commodity going around right now.

CA – We all saw the way the US presidential campaign captured international imagination – who would have thought that the French (the French, for God's sake) would be clamouring to meet a black US president! These are unprecedented times on just about any level we can think of – and in Obama, we currently have an international leader of the superpower that has this incredible impact on people. When was the last time we saw world leaders jostling each other to have their picture taken with the US president or seasoned, hard bitten journalists using their camera phones to take pictures for themselves after they'd taken pictures for their newspaper or magazine? We can sit and debate whether or not Obama is a worthy winner, or if this impact will last and all sorts of logic. Sometimes, we just analyse too much. And sometimes it's as simple and as complex as needing hope and finding it in a single individual. Maybe, it's not a bad thing for him to have received an award so early in his Presidency that reminds him, it's not just the hopes of the American people he carries on his shoulders.

NK – This may however be exactly the kind of thing that creates domestic barriers to the achievement of those hopes. A good deal of the American people resent being constantly called upon to be the world's saviour and punish Presidents who value international acclaim over America's domestic priorities or national interest. In that sense, the Nobel committee, in seeking to encourage the early initiatives of the Obama administration, may have created a rod for the President's back.

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