

A realistic idealist at Oslo

Thomas Reese | Jan. 9, 2010



U.S. President Barack Obama holds his medal and certificate after accepting the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize at City Hall in Oslo, Norway, Dec. 10. (CNS/Reuters/John McConnico)

Viewpoint

Many on the political left have become disillusioned with Barack Obama because of his escalation of the Afghanistan war, his bailout of the financial industry, and his failure to advance his domestic agenda. As a result, they read his speech in Oslo, Norway, through the lens of disillusionment. Pacifists (who must not have been listening during the presidential campaign) are appalled by his defense of the just-war theory. Others argue that he has not proved that the Afghan war truly is a just war.

Such criticisms failed to see the speech for what it was: not a detailed defense of the Afghan war, but a comprehensive overview of the role of the United States in international affairs, a view that is principled and realistic, not ideological or naive.

Obama began by asserting that violence is sometimes necessary, and while he honors and respects the views of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, as president he has responsibilities that these men did not. He acknowledges that war can be justified only if certain criteria are met: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence.

He does not present war as some glorious adventure but as an ugly and brutal reality: "No matter how justified, war promises human tragedy." Nor is every use of force justified even in a just war. "We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend." He commits the United States to following international standards that govern the use of force.

Obama does not present war as the only instrument of foreign policy. He points to the United Nations, international treaties and aid programs. He argues that "the ideals of liberty and self-determination, equality and the rule of law have haltingly advanced," but he asserts that the postwar institutions were built to deal international conflicts, not with civil wars and terrorism. Like those who built them, we will need "the same vision, hard work and persistence" to find new ways to peace.

He proposed three ways to build a just and lasting peace.

"We must develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to actually change behavior," he told his audience. "Intransigence must be met with increased pressure -- and such pressure exists only when the world stands together as one."

Second, we must recognize that "only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting. ... Peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please, choose their own leaders or assemble without fear." But unlike ideological purists, he understands that "sanctions without outreach -- condemnation without discussion -- can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door."

Third, "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." He understands that "security does not exist where human beings do not have access to enough food, or clean water, or the medicine and shelter they need to survive. It does not exist where children can't aspire to a decent education or a job that supports a family. The absence of hope can rot a society from within."


In his Oslo speech, Obama sketched out the big picture on foreign policy and showed himself to be an idealist but a realistic one. He is not a revolutionary; he is an incrementalist who believes that every step forward is progress. He understands the fallen nature of humankind but believes we can be better. We "do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected."

In his address, he constantly tried to find the balance between realism and idealism: "We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of depravation, and still strive for dignity. Clear-eyed, we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that -- for that is the story of human progress; that's the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on earth."

Ideologues of the right and the left will find such statements wishy-washy. Others, like David Brooks and E.J. Dionne, heard in it the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. But the speech was also very Catholic in its embrace of both the just-war theory and multilateralism, human rights and responsibilities, peace and justice, sin and the "spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls."

Obama has articulated the big picture, now his challenge is to implement policies that advance justice and peace rather than making matters worse.

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Three opinions on President Obama's Nobel speech

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese calls [Obama A realistic idealist at Oslo](#) [1].

But NCR columnists Coleman McCarthy says, Obama too easily dismissed Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi and that the president should have studied othe Nobel laurates more, bcause, he said, [Peacemakers also see the world as it is](#) [2].

David Kreiger writes that Obama's Oslo speech "must reflect the divisions within himself and his personal struggles to reconcile them. ... How troubling it is to see this man of hope bogged down by war, not only on the ground but in his mind." Kreiger's essay is called [The Nobel War Lecture](#) [3].

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