

Principle of Hope

Don LaCoss

“Dr. Alfred Nobel, a man who became rich discovering new ways to kill more people faster than anyone ever before, died yesterday,” declared one French newspaper obituary in 1888.

Nobel, a Swedish chemist, engineer, inventor, and munitions industrialist, had become obscenely wealthy producing and selling weapons all over the world. In addition to getting rich through his commercial activities as a shameless merchant of death, Nobel also owned hundreds of patents, the most lucrative of which was his 1867 process for weaponizing the dangerously unstable explosive compound nitroglycerine into an easier-to-handle form that he called “dynamite.”

He was also responsible for an innovative gunpowder concoction called ballistite, as well as gelnite, that favorite ingredient of car-bomb manufacturers everywhere.

The 1888 obituary announcing Nobel’s death was eight years too soon. He was working in Paris at the time, and when the arms manufacturer read this and similar reports about his life and legacy, he realized that history would not treat him kindly once he actually did die.

So, in an effort to clean up his monstrously bloodstained reputation, Nobel re-wrote his will to create an international foundation that would establish the five “Nobel Prizes” after his death with a portion of his fortune (more than \$250 million in today’s money, which gives you the sense of the cash that could be made in the European arms trade during the Age of Imperialism).

In December 2009, mere days after formally announcing his plan to escalate and intensify the US war in Afghanistan by deploying 30,000 more troops in order to protect “vital national interests,” US President Obama was declared the recipient of a Nobel Prize for Peace, an award supposedly given to the one person in the world who had “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 congresses.”

Obama now joins the ranks of other statist war-makers and empire-builders who have won the Peace Prize, such as Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Kissinger.

“Let us reach for the world that ought to be,” Obama said with a straight face at the award ceremony as thousands of anti-war protesters marched in Oslo and denounced the US President. “We can understand that there will be war and still strive for peace.” But you cannot “reach for the world that ought to be” by resigning yourself to live only in the world that is.

Oblivious or apathetic to the horrors of neoliberal imperialism, Obama has gone ahead and re-entrenched the US war in Afghanistan at the cost of tens of billions of dollars and an untold number of lives for years to come. Obama’s insistence on starting a “draw-down” of troops there in eighteen months is, of course, silly.

This escalation means a minimum of five more years of US war in Afghanistan, though many experts believe ten to twelve years to be far more likely. Moreover, the idea that the US could “win” this war is equally ridiculous. Afghanistan has been the graveyard of empires since Alexander the Great, and no army of a “superior civilization”—the Sassanid Persian Empire, the Mongol Empire, the British Empire, or the Soviet Union—has been able to successfully conquer and occupy a fiercely decentralized nation that is splintered by geography, regional loyalties, and ethnolinguistic identities.

In a conversation about the possibility of a civil war in Afghanistan between Pashtuns and Tajiks, a retired general who had been in charge of the Soviet counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan for ten years explained it by quoting a bit of traditional Pashtun folk-wisdom: "It is me against all my brothers; me and my brothers against all our cousins; and me, my brothers, and my cousins against everyone else." Compounding all this is the cross-pollinating international hostilities in southwest Asia between Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, and Iran.

In short, Obama's efforts to prop up Hamid Karzai's fabulously corrupt, completely inept, and widely discredited regime in order to "win" the war in Afghanistan equals the gross stupidity of Kennedy's and Johnson's commitment to strengthen the vicious Catholic police state of Ngo Dinh Diem all those years ago.

Given the brutality and horror of the Prize's financial origins, this award to Obama during the week he announced an escalation of hostilities in Afghanistan doesn't seem incongruous in the least, as it was only the most recent episode in the long history of how war is peace among the ruling classes.

But apparently there were many liberals who had supported the Obama presidency who saw this Peace Prize as an ugly irony or contradiction. These liberals stroked their leftover "Hope" and "Change" relics from a year ago and gnashed their teeth in disappointed anguish while others of their kind closed ranks and hysterically redoubled their loyalty to the President by loudly praising the man for his courageous, nuanced understanding of the war. I was accosted by one of these disappointed Obama fans recently, clearly distraught but still on the defensive. "Well," he snapped belligerently. "Aren't you going to tell me something sarcastic like 'I told you so'?"

I shook my head and shrugged. "So what are you going to do now? Break up with Obama?"

"Well, no!" he said emphatically. "How can I? I'm not going to vote for Sarah Palin in 2012—be realistic!"

And so there it is—Obama's "hope" in the simplest and most succinct of forms, a hope that is "realistic" in terms of limits established by what liberals see as their only alternative: political support for that insufferable Emma Bovary of Alaska.

The Nobel awards committee justified its decision to choose Obama for the Peace Prize by saying: "Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future." Recalling all those killed and maimed by Nobel's big business, it is no surprise, really, just how squalid and paltry the notion of hope is at his foundation

There's a different sort of hope that needs to be mentioned here. Between 1938 and 1947, the apocalyptic German-Jewish Marxist writer Ernst Bloch created an encyclopedic three-volume philosophical meditation on libertarian utopian thought called *The Principle of Hope*.

Unlike the constricted and constipated "realism" of Obama's hope, Bloch's hope celebrates the fantastical realms of the past: poetry, fairy tales, daydreams, jokes, the passions released by music and movies, the reveries of tourists, the spaces of experimental architecture and speculative geography, and the impossible worlds of Renaissance alchemists and nineteenth-century utopian socialists. All of these things, Bloch argues, are efforts to escape that have been fundamental to the human mind for a long time.

The examples of utopian thinking past and present can be put to service in our daily struggle to emancipate ourselves from the miserabilist realities of a capitalist order that ruthlessly rationalizes, abstracts, reifies, alienates, and disenchanters in order to facilitate more profitable systems of merchandise production and consumption.

Bloch sees hope as the creative imaginings of a near-future world where people will live free from coercive and compulsory communities where we all are forced to dwell. It is the hope of resistance rather than Obama's hope of empire.

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