

Obama's Nobel can help him win a bigger prize

Michael Fullilove

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Washington is flabbergasted by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama. Conservatives are appalled; centrists are perplexed; even liberals are surprised.

Let us be honest: at first glance, the decision is seriously quirky. Mr Obama has been president for less than a year. He is picking his way through a very inhospitable political landscape: the worst possible time, in other words, to run a victory lap. The war in Afghanistan is going badly and his Middle East peace efforts have stalled. It is far from clear where his domestic agenda – healthcare, energy and climate change, and jobs – will end up. And his various priorities are starting to bump into each other.

Mr Obama does have bold ambitions to make the world a better place. He has struck a winning new diplomatic tone and introduced some much-needed pragmatism into US foreign policy. He even had some success recently on the nuclear non-proliferation front by getting Iran to agree to transfer some of its nuclear fuel abroad and allow United Nations inspectors to visit its enrichment facility at Qom. But this is thin gruel compared to the historic achievements of Nobel laureates such as Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev and the Dalai Lama (whom he has just declined to meet).

All this may prompt the question: what's the Norwegian word for premature? Is there some obscure Scandinavian explanation for this weirdness? Perhaps Oslo felt they needed to be nice to Mr Obama because his efforts to secure the Olympics were snubbed in Copenhagen.

Spare a thought for Bill Clinton, who will be crying into his coffee. Apparently Mr Clinton could not impress the Nobel committee regardless of how much time he spent with the Israelis and the Palestinians at Camp David. All Mr Obama had to do was get elected.

The president is probably a little embarrassed by this decision. I am reminded of a speech he gave in 2006 to Washington's Gridiron dinner, as a recently elected senator: "This appearance is really the capstone of an incredible 18 months. I've been very blessed. Keynote speaker at the Democratic convention. The cover of Newsweek. My book made the best-seller list. I just won a Grammy for reading it on tape . . . Really what else is there to do? Well, I guess . . . I could pass a law, or something."

Does all this mean the Nobel committee got it wrong? Not necessarily. But the final verdict will depend less on Mr Obama's actions than on the world's.

The committee may flatter itself that the award will influence US decision-making on the great issues of the day: nuclear disarmament, Iran or Afghanistan. It won't. Obama does not need to be nudged to do the right thing on these questions. There are far more significant incentives for him to act than a medal, no matter how prestigious.

The committee may believe that its verdict will change Americans' minds on their country's role in the world. It won't. If anything, it will turn people off. It has lit up the right, who are quite correctly pointing to the yawning gap between the fervour of the president's fans and the sum of his achievements so far.

The way this Nobel can assist, however, is by making it a little harder for the rest of the world to turn away when Mr Obama asks them for help.

One of the president's central foreign policy challenges is to convert the international goodwill felt towards his administration and his country into meaningful co-operation. America's power is great, but not unlimited. Washington cannot solve any of the biggest global issues by itself.

If the international community likes Mr Obama so much, then let them really show it. Let other leaders share Mr Obama's burdens. Let recalcitrant European powers withdraw the caveats that are preventing their troops from fighting as effectively as possible in Afghanistan, so that a just peace can be secured. Let Russia take a constructive approach to arms reduction talks, and help to maintain the pressure on Tehran to allow scrutiny of its nuclear program. Let China and India accept their global responsibilities to mitigate climate change (and in so doing, push the US Congress in that direction, too).

If the world likes having a multilateralist in the White House, then the world should show America that multilateralism works. A Nobel is a token of the world's affections. Let it be a symbol of the world's intentions as well.

The writer is director of the global issues program at the Lowy Institute in Sydney and a non-resident senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution