

1 of 2 DOCUMENTS

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LEAD: Obama's Nobel Peace Prize shocks White House, president's critics.**LENGTH:** 779 words

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The early-morning news Friday that U.S. President Barack Obama had won the Nobel Peace Prize baffled both the White House and its critics, encouraging the president's allies and frustrating those who believe the high honor was prematurely bestowed.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, who broke the news to Obama in a wake-up telephone call, initially reacted with one word in an e-mail to CBS News: "Wow."

In a much-delayed address from the White House Rose Garden, Obama said he was "surprised and deeply humbled" as he also demonstrated recognition of widespread criticism that the award was hastily conferred on a nine-month president.

"I know that throughout history, the Nobel Peace Prize has not just been used to honor specific achievement - it's also been used as a means to give momentum to a set of causes," Obama said.

"And that is why I will accept this award as a call to action -- a call for all nations to confront the common challenges of the 21st century," he added, citing climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, war in Afghanistan and Iraq and the economic crisis.

The Norwegian Nobel committee, which processed nominations for the prize just two weeks after Obama took office, announced its decision as an affirmation of Obama's "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples."

In what has been read as an indirect criticism of former President George W. Bush's foreign policy, the Nobel committee said of Obama: "His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world's population."

Obama included this message in his statement as he called the award "an affirmation of American leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations."

Obama allies were quick to cite the award as a hearty endorsement of the president's foreign policy agenda.

"It validates the president's approach to tough trans-national challenges such as global warming and the spread of nuclear arms," Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement.

"And it celebrates his steady efforts to improve America's standing around the world," he added.

While Obama supporters are delighted by an award they are using as a political boost, conservatives are criticizing the Nobel committee for politicizing the award and honoring a leader without citing concrete accomplishments.

Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs at the CATO Institute, called the conferral a "further denigration of the award" and indicative of a bias against Republicans, who have watched former President Jimmy Carter, former Vice President Al Gore, and now Obama receive the award.

"There's nothing wrong with hope, but one would like to see hopebased on a realistic view of the world and many of us think Obama lacks precisely that," Pilon said.

Former Bush administration spokesman Pete Seat cautioned that theWhite House would have to walk a "difficult tightrope" in reacting to the Nobel.

"He can't look too excited knowing he hasn't had any measurable foreign policy accomplishment and at the same time it is difficult for him to turn the award down and acknowledge critics that believe his first year in office hasn't amounted to much," Seat wrote to Kyodo News.

Stephen Hess, a Brookings Institution scholar who has served under four presidents of both major political parties, applauded the White House for a measured reaction to the decision of an unpredictablecommittee, saying Obama "said exactly what he should have said andin some ways the only thing that he could have said."

As for early predictions that Obama might turn down the award, Hess called the prospective move "uncivil" and that it "never entered my mind that he would do that."

Pilon, who held senior posts in former President Ronald Reagan's administration, advised to "approach this with caution because it lends itself so easily to ridicule."

Pilon cited a satirical column published online in the WashingtonPost in which Roger Cohen -- echoing the sentiments of many conservatives -- joked, "the Pulitzer Prize for Literature went to (formerRepublican vice presidential nominee) Sarah Palin for her stated intention 'to read a book someday.'"

While some warn against inflating the honor of Obama's Nobel, Hess observed that critics should guard against counter-productive denigration.

"They have to be fairly skillful because they can go overboard," Hess said. "It is, after all, indirectly an honor to the Americanpeople because we chose this president."

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