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NEWS ANALYSIS

Nobel Peace Prize may weigh heavily on Obama

The award is likely to call attention to how much remains unfinished and to the problems in the Afghanistan strategy.

By Greg Miller

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Reporting from Washington

The gold medallion given to recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize doesn't come with a ribbon, but the award could still end up being a weight around President Obama's neck.



Intended to honor Obama for altering the nation's diplomatic direction, the award is likely to call attention to how much of the administration's agenda -- including closing Guantanamo Bay and winding down the war in Iraq -- remains undone, and to the problematic nature of the American presence in Afghanistan.

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The prize also poses political risks for a president routinely depicted by Republicans as more focused on seeking international approval than on defending the security interests of the United States.

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That criticism could be compounded if Obama rejects the military's request for an additional 40,000 troops in Afghanistan. Obama has recently struggled over how to proceed in that conflict, and just hours after learning that he had won the award, he met with senior members of his war Cabinet.

Mindful of such perils, the president sought Friday to downplay the significance of the Nobel Peace Prize, [describing it](#) as a "means to give momentum" to causes that others also embrace, and saying, "To be honest, I do not feel that I deserve" it.

The award undoubtedly carries benefits. Winning the Nobel might strengthen Obama's diplomatic hand as he enters negotiations with nuclear rogues such as North Korea and Iran.

"We think that this gives us a sense of momentum when the United [States] has accolades tossed its way rather than shoes," said State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, recalling the reception that President George W. Bush got last year in Baghdad.

But some in Obama's party saw dangers. Underscoring concern that the award might fuel criticism that Obama is too accommodating, the Democratic National Committee issued a news release designed to show that the president is still reviled by America's foes. It showcased comments from the Taliban condemning the award as "unjust," and from Hamas calling it "too early."

If Obama failed to make headway on his agenda, some Democrats said, the award could also come to be seen as the equivalent of the "Mission Accomplished" banner unfurled on an aircraft carrier for a speech by Bush shortly after the fall of Baghdad in 2003.

Joe Trippi, a Democratic strategist, said that if the job market remained sour, he expected to see the Nobel medallion featured prominently in GOP attack ads with such lines as: "He got a Nobel Prize. What did you get? A pink slip."

"Either the economy is going, and this won't matter, or this will be another tool in the Republicans' arsenal to accuse the president of not doing enough," Trippi said.

"Maybe if he won the Nobel Prize for economic recovery and created hundreds of thousands of new jobs, this would be a good thing for him politically," Trippi said.

In announcing the prize, the [Nobel panel credited Obama](#) with creating "a new climate in international politics" and said that, through his efforts, "multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position" in world affairs.

Since taking office, Obama has embarked on an ambitious diplomatic agenda. While touching down in 16 countries, he has reached out to Muslims with a historic speech in Cairo; pledged at the United Nations to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons; and renewed the push for Middle East peace.

The Nobel committee cited those outreach efforts as among the reasons he deserved the peace prize. But Republicans are citing those same initiatives as they build a dossier for the midterm elections next year that argues that Obama too often apologizes for U.S. power.

Two potential 2012 challengers -- Mitt Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, and Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty -- have delivered multiple speeches in recent weeks focusing on Obama's foreign policy and criticizing him for what they view as a form of appeasement. On Friday, Pawlenty nevertheless said of Obama's prize that "under any circumstance, an appropriate response is to say, 'Congratulations.'"

Last month, the White House [scrapped a missile defense system](#) that had been touted by Bush as key to protecting Europe from nuclear attack. The move pleased Russia, which regarded the missiles as a threat. But critics said it sacrificed security against the nuclear ambitions of Iran.

More significantly, Obama also opened dialogue with Tehran after decades of diplomatic stalemate, betting that talks rather than threats might persuade the regime to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Iran [appeared to make some concessions](#) in preliminary talks in Geneva. After being confronted by the U.S. with evidence that a hidden nuclear compound could be used for weapons production, Tehran pledged to allow inspections at the site and to export its enriched uranium.

Obama described the outcome as a "constructive beginning." But, as with most of the administration's foreign policy initiatives, the prospects for achieving lasting progress remain unclear.

In other areas, the administration has struggled to deliver on pledges that were central to the presidential campaign.

Just this week, [Atty. Gen. Eric H. Holder Jr. acknowledged](#) that the administration was unlikely to meet its January deadline for closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where detainees from the war on terrorism have been held for years.

More problematic at the moment is the confusion surrounding the administration's policy on Afghanistan, where security has deteriorated rapidly and the Taliban controls large swaths of territory.

After unveiling a "comprehensive" strategy for the region in March, [Obama now seems to be second-guessing that decision](#) -- caught between his handpicked general's request for more troops and growing opposition from Democrats to any plan that would expand the 8-year-old war.

Later Friday, Obama again assembled the members of his war Cabinet to weigh Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal's call for 40,000 more troops.

Summing up the president's day, the libertarian Cato Institute issued a news release with a pointed title: "For Obama, peace in the morning, war in the afternoon."

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