

Honor May Hinder Obama Rather Than 'Give Momentum'

Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON _ President Barack Obama, who has pledged to place diplomacy ahead of confrontation in world affairs, won the Nobel Prize for Peace on Friday, a remarkable and controversial honor for a leader nine months in office.

Obama, as if acknowledging the unusual nature of the award, accepted it "as a call to action" rather than as a reward for past accomplishments.

"This award must be shared with everyone who strives for justice and dignity," Obama said at a Rose Garden appearance.

The gold medallion given to recipients of the prize does not come with a ribbon, but the award could end up being a weight around Obama's neck.

Intended to honor how Obama has altered the nation's diplomatic direction, the peace prize is likely to call attention to how much of the administration's agenda _ from closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay to winding down the war in Iraq _ remains undone.

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

That criticism could be compounded if Obama rejects the military's request for an additional 40,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Mindful of such perils, the president sought to downplay the significance of the Nobel, 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. Democrats basked in the latest accolade bestowed on their party's brightest star. And winning the Nobel might strengthen Obama's diplomatic hand as he enters negotiations with nuclear rogues such as North Korea and Iran.

But some in Obama's own party saw risks. 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 come to be seen as the equivalent of the "Mission Accomplished" banner that dogged former President George W. Bush.

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.

The language was cited by Republicans as proof that politics had guided the decision, and that the Nobel Committee couldn't resist a belated rebuke to former President George W. Bush.

"I think the Nobel Committee couldn't vote in our election in 2008, so they decided to vote this year," said John Bolton, who served as ambassador to the United Nations under Bush. "It's high-minded Europeans talking down to hayseed Americans, saying, 'This is the way you ought to be.'"

The last sitting presidents to win the award did so on the heels of major diplomatic accomplishments, Bolton said. Theodore Roosevelt negotiated an end to the Russo-Japanese war, and Woodrow Wilson spearheaded the creation of the League of Nations.

Thorbjorn Jagland, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, defended the decision.

"The question we have to ask is who has done the most in the previous year to enhance peace in the world," Jagland said. "Who has done more than Barack Obama?"

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 campaign-year dossier that argues that Obama too often apologizes for U.S. power.

Two potential 2012 challengers, Mitt Romney and 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.

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 with evidence that it was building a hidden nuclear compound, 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, Attorney General Eric V. Holder acknowledged that the administration was unlikely to meet its January deadline for closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

More problematic at the moment is the confusion surrounding the administration's policy on Afghanistan, where the security situation has deteriorated rapidly and the Taliban now control 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 hand-picked general's request for more troops and growing opposition from his own party to any plan that would expand the 8-year-old war.

Just hours after being awakened with the news he had won the Nobel Prize, Obama again assembled the members of his war cabinet at the White House to weigh Gen. Stanley McChrystal's call for 40,000 more soldiers.

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

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(Peter Wallsten of Tribune Newspapers' Washington Bureau contributed to this report.)

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