

//Notas de Análisis//

Oslo Beats Copenhagen, or does it?

**By Maria L. Fornella*

After two difficult weeks of bad press during which President Obama was accused of rashness (for his quick trip to Copenhagen in an unsuccessful bid on behalf of Chicago before the International Olympic Committee) and of dithering (for taking too long to decide on a new strategy for Afghanistan), on Friday October 9th Americans woke up to the news that their President had won the Nobel Peace Prize. With a mixture of surprise and exhilaration, he addressed the media and tried to be graceful in accepting it while at the same time pre-empting the inevitable criticism that would follow. He made it clear that he *“did not view this as a recognition of his own accomplishments but rather as an affirmation of American leadership on behalf of the aspirations held by people in all nation... as a means to give momentum to a set of causes...as a call to action...for all nations to confront the common challenges of the 21st century”*.

The reactions in the United States were mixed, but in general, they were the reverse image of those in Europe, where Obama is still widely admired and idealized. Surprise, outrage and skepticism were the three main responses by the American public. On the Right there was outrage because the prize came so early into his presidency, and at a time when his lack of achievements is starting to haunt the administration and has become the object of comedy sketches, from Jon Stewart's Daily Show to Saturday Night Live. Moderates were pleasantly surprised, even if somewhat puzzled, and immediately fretted that the prize would have more negative than positive consequences in the domestic realm. Indeed, recognition by the rest of the world makes even his supporters a little uncomfortable, and it is used as ammunition against the President by those who accuse him of being too apologetic to foreign powers. Skeptics on the Left felt that it was a strange choice because the country under his leadership is still involved in two wars, and about to escalate one of them. To this there is the added perception by many in his own party that he is doing little on the human rights front, especially with respect to Iran, where several protesters are about to be executed while diplomatic talks on the nuclear issue continue.

It would be ludicrous to think that the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded only to those who succeed. In that case, it would only be awarded once every a hundred years. Instead, the prize is meant as a reward and an encouragement to leaders who fight for peace. When German Chancellor Willy Brandt was awarded the prize in 1971, he had just launched his *“Ostpolitik”* and he had made headlines when he visited Warsaw to sign the Warsaw Treaty and spontaneously knelt at the steps of the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto uprising against the Nazis. His acts did not per se

bring an end to Cold War confrontation but it can be argued that Brandt started a process that culminated with détente and more concretely, with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which established a framework of cooperation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries and gradually became a manifesto for the dissident movement against Communism in the Eastern bloc. Later, and as part of the same process, the Nobel Peace Prize would be awarded to Lech Walesa in 1983 for his leadership in the union movement against the Polish Communist regime, and finally to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990. Their combined efforts finally led to the fall of Communism, and proved that peace, in the words of Nobel Peace prize awardee Oscar Arias, “*has no finishing line, no deadline, no fixed definition of achievement...it is a never ending process, the work of many decisions by many people in many countries...*”

In only nine months of his presidency, Obama has changed the international climate of confrontation and preemptive aggression established by Bush, who alienated even our national allies. He has restored the principles of the New World Order envisioned by Bush’s father: one based on international law and diplomacy, consensus-building and on progressive nuclear disarmament. It is this renewal of promises by the US to abide by international treaties, to use dialog instead of confrontation and to cooperate with the rest of the world through the United Nations that the Oslo Nobel Committee was rewarding. But as Eugene Robinson of the Washington Post has observed, if Obama were to find a cure for cancer, his critics would “*blame him for putting some hard-working, red-blooded American oncologists out of work*”. In sum, his critics cannot have it both ways: they derided Obama for his unsuccessful trip to Copenhagen and made fun of his excessive self-confidence and his belief that by his actions alone he can improve American standing in the world. On the other hand, when Oslo honored him with the Nobel Prize, a sign that he is trusted and admired because of his approach to doing exactly that, they use this as proof that he cannot be trusted because foreigners like him too much!

Almost a century ago, another US President found himself in a similar situation: admired by the rest of the world but shunned at home, Woodrow Wilson, who had led the way to peace at the end of World War I through the Versailles Treaty and the creation of the League of Nations (based on his famous Fourteen Points), received the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize at the end of his Presidency but after public opinion had already turned against him. Afflicted by a stroke and embittered by his battles with Congress, he never had a chance to see his work come to fruition: the Republican Senate voted against the United States’ membership in the League. The consequences of this mistake are well-known: the United States turned inward, became isolationist and protectionist, only to find itself mired in the Great Depression by 1930. A weakened League was unable to stop the rising fascist states, and another world war followed. Later in the conflict the United States had to come out of its isolationism to defend Europe and establish peace. Wilson had died in 1924, but in many ways his vision of multilateralism and war prevention survived in the signing of the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, this time under

the leadership of the United States.

Peace is even more elusive today, in a global world of unstable states and violent non-state actors, of deep resentments and irreconcilable views and values. It would be ludicrous to think that the US can bring about peace by itself or for that matter, to solve any of the problems that confront it without the cooperation of others. From global warming to transnational crime to terrorism, the only relatively acceptable solutions can be found through diplomacy and multilateral action. It is in this light that the Nobel Peace Prize Committee's intention has to be interpreted. For the first time in eight years, the United States is led by a President who understands that the complexity of post-modern conflict and the depth of the challenges faced can only be managed (not solved) by states acting in concert.

The intricacy of global politics today is further enhanced by the immense and unprecedented political awareness of the masses everywhere. This new reality of massive political awakening is especially destabilizing in the early stages of national consciousness, during which emotions and feelings related to identity, ethnicity and geography are greatly intensified and thus become destabilizing. It is this climate of resentment, fragmentation and political awakening that the West has to confront not only in the battlefield (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq) but also at home, where immigration has altered the national face of states and where the North-South conflict has to be confronted every day. This changing geopolitical context, together with economic realities, is affecting the US place in the world and is resulting in the relative weakening of the West in general and of America in particular. Increasingly, the West is going to need the cooperation of a China that is "rising peacefully" and a still-belligerent Russia to settle most problems in the Middle East and Central Asia. As the United States and the West come to terms with their loss of power, as Europe still struggles to speak in one voice, as their military resources are tied down for the long term in areas where the political awakening is particularly virulent, it is ludicrous to expect peace with capital letters. In the best case scenario, these will be challenges that will require serious negotiations and tough diplomacy in order to be managed, and those should include the rising powers and even some unsavory interlocutors like Iran (which can be a partner in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the Taliban (some elements of which can be brought into local agreements and peeled away from Al Qaeda). Obama should use the encouragement of the Nobel Peace Prize to move these negotiations forward, without ultimatums, without immediate deadlines, with the guiding purpose of accommodation and de-escalation, of managing conflict more than forever solving it.

On the home front, Obama publicly refused to celebrate the passing of the Baucus health-care reform bill yesterday, although this is a major stride towards the final legislative product. By a vote of 14 to 9, with only one Republican voting in favor, the Senate Finance Committee cleared the way for a full vote on the Senate floor once it is merged with the version from another committee that was approved a month ago. Senator Olympia Snowe, the only Republican to vote for it, said she was

responding to “*the call of History, and that consequences of inaction dictate the urgency of Congress*” to act. Once it passes the Senate, it will be merged with the House bill and become law. This puts Obama in a very good position to succeed in health care reform before the end of the year, but he underplayed the achievement, saying it was just one more step and there still remained a long way to go. He did, however, thank Senator Snowe for her “political courage and seriousness of purpose.”

Finally, on November 3rd, all eyes will be on the state of Virginia. Virginians will be voting for governor in a close race in which Bob McDonnell, the Republican candidate has been consistently ahead in the polls. Because Northern Virginia is so close to Washington, not only geographically but also culturally and politically, it is deemed the most important race for governor in the country. After eight years of excellent leadership under two Democratic governors, Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, (there is no re-election for governor in the state of Virginia), the electorate seems ready for a change, even as political pundits are portraying the race as a poll on the President himself. That is why, at the end of this month Obama will be campaigning for Creigh Deeds, the Democratic candidate for Governor of Virginia. It is another political gamble by the hyperkinetic president and one he should reconsider for at least two reasons. First, Virginians are a tough lot and usually prefer to balance the party ticket of state and federal government. Indeed, according to Larry Sabato of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, for the last eight consecutive elections, Virginians have voted for governor the nominee of the party opposite to the one that held the White House. That means they will vote for Republican candidate Mc Donnell and Obama’s candidate will lose. Second, until this last election when Obama won the state, Virginians had voted Republican in nearly every presidential election since 1952. It was thanks to the youth vote that he won, and those voters are the least likely to come out and vote in the election for governor. The older crowds that vote religiously in every election are more likely to vote Republican this time. For Obama to campaign for Deeds is then a repeat of the Copenhagen Olympic bid effect.

Passing the health care bill and achieving a Democratic win in at least some of the governor races would represent incredible boosts for the President that he will need as his support numbers dwindle, especially if he makes the unpopular decision of sending more troops to Afghanistan. By the time all those questions are settled, the Copenhagen Olympics and the Oslo Peace Prize will be distant memories. But then, he will have to go back and address Copenhagen II, namely, climate change.

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